



THE CHRISTMAS CHRONICLES

THE LONELY EVE

A SNOW WHITE AND
ROSE RED RETELLING

EMILY DEADY

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Editor: Allison Erin Wright

Cover Design: Karri Klawiter

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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)
[Chapter 12](#)
[Chapter 13](#)
[Chapter 14](#)
[Chapter 15](#)
[Chapter 16](#)

[Also by Emily Deady](#)
[Acknowledgments](#)

CHAPTER 1

Once upon a time, across the river from Punta, there was a lovely old mansion that had housed several generations of the Caradoc family. A hedge of jasmine grew up around the front entrance, trimmed back each year so the fragrant white flowers had room to bloom all summer long. The front garden was meticulously tended, but wild red poppies still managed to sprout from every possible crack and cranny.

And so, Lady Caradoc named her two daughters Jasmine and Poppy. And like their namesakes, the two girls filled the house with beauty and life. The elder, refined and elegant. The younger, wild and carefree.



“O _____ said Lady Caradoc, standing in the doorway of the sitting room.

Technically, it was the doorway to the nursery, but since Jasmine had recently turned thirteen, she preferred to call it a sitting room. To her mother, of course, it would always be the nursery.

Nevertheless, Jasmine beamed under her mother’s praise. The ordinarily academic room looked positively magical.

“Look here, Mama. Over here!” Poppy, Jasmine’s younger sister, tugged their mother through the doorway.

Green velvet curtains adorned the windows. At the moment, they were tied back to let in the last bit of evening sun, but their thick texture promised a warm insulation from the icy landscape outside. Long strings of crocheted white lace were pinned to the curtains, mimicking the delicate snowfall just outside the window. And across the panes of glass, a garland of mismatched wooden beads was pinned to and fro, crisscrossing the large window. Interspersed between the wooden beads, glass pendants also hung, catching the sunlight and throwing a rainbow of colors into the room.

“I strung all the beads on this one.” Poppy pointed to the window as she pulled her mother around a low-lying table. Suddenly switching direction, Poppy pointed to the mantle above the open fireplace. “And Jasmine strung that one.”

Jasmine grinned at her younger sister’s excitement but inwardly giggled at the distinction. It was fairly obvious which garland had been made by whom. The one

over the mantle had an elegant, repetitive pattern of wooden beads and glass pendants, while the other's simple construction had been easier for Poppy to master.

"They both look lovely, Poppy." Mama pulled her hand free as she caught her balance, carefully smoothing the silk folds of her finest dress. "I'm sure you will have a lovely Christmas Eve together, but I've just popped up to say a quick goodnight, and—"

Poppy immediately grabbed her mother's hand again. "But why don't you stay with us? We are going to drink hot chocolate and eat candied kiwi!"

Jasmine ran forward then, all pretense of being grown up forgotten. She reached for her mother's other hand. "Yes, please stay?" she begged. "The sky is perfectly clear tonight, so we are going to see Persephone's Veil!"

"I've seen plenty of stars before." Mama shook her head. "You are going to have a wonderful night, just the two of you." She squeezed Jasmine's hand before extracting her own and reaching into her handbag.

"But this is not a star," Jasmine countered. "The astronomers say it is a comet! Apparently it has not passed Earth in over eight hundred years." She was boggled thinking about it. She could barely comprehend that much time.

"Which is why I brought you Grandpapa's old looking glass," Mama said. "This should help with seeing your star—I mean comet."

She handed Jasmine a short brass contraption.

"Oh, thank you!" Jasmine accepted the tool with all the reverence and awe it deserved. She loved studying the stars, and Mama had never let her use the telescope on her own before.

She gently twisted the outer ring of the instrument, extending the five concentric tubes to their full length. The second-largest tube had a small plaque engraved with her grandfather's name. She ran her fingers over the delicate carvings of anchors and sextants that surrounded the plaque. The middle tube, now fully visible, had a delicate inscription: *In Stellis, Magica est. Or, In the stars, there is magic.*

Jasmine held the lengthened telescope up to her eye, adjusting the outer ring to find her focus.

"Next year," Mama continued, "Christmas Eve will be even more exciting because Jasmine will be old enough to join me at the marchioness's ball, and then you'll see why I love it so."

Jasmine slid the telescope from her face, her eyes fixed on the wall ahead. "I do not think I want to go to the Christmas Eve Ball next year," she said.

"Of course you do." Mama laughed. "It's the most wonderful event of the year. The marchioness has incredible artists decorate the castle with dozens of trees, so it looks like a snowy forest. And there are beautiful glass snowflakes sparkling from all the branches, and there is dancing, and wonderful things to eat."

Jasmine relaxed her hold on the looking glass, cradling it gently to her chest. "That does sound nice, I suppose, but I like decorating here. And I can just go outside if I want to see a snowy forest."

She gently compressed the telescope back to its compact size. The ball did sound fun, but it also sounded like a lot of work. Mother spent days preparing for it, meeting with the seamstress weeks in advance, eating practically nothing at all, and complaining of headaches and stress.

"Christmas Eve is my favorite night of the year, and I like it here the best." Jasmine looked around at the decorated room. Small porcelain figurines adorned the mantle over an already roaring fire. Decorative pillowcases—embroidered by her during her sewing lessons—sat upon the sofa. Miss Briar had put an extra pile of blankets on one end of the sofa as well, a reminder that Jasmine and Poppy could

stay up as late as they wished to tonight, a special treat indeed.

“Do you get to roast sweetmeats and chestnuts at the marchioness’s ball?” Poppy asked. “And drink hot chocolate?”

Mother shook her head no, then stopped and nodded. “There are all sorts of treats you’ve never even seen before, but no one is roasting them. They are already prepared. But there is hot chocolate, amongst plenty of other wonderful things to drink.”

Jasmine wrinkled her nose. Roasting the treats herself was the best part.

But the worst part . . . Jasmine looked back up at her mother as the thought hit her. “What will Poppy do on Christmas Eve next year if I go to the ball?”

“She will stay here with Miss Briar of course,” Mama replied. “Darlings, I really must be going. Hug me goodbye. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Jasmine stepped forward, keeping her face turned to the floor. She could imagine nothing worse than leaving Poppy all alone on Christmas Eve. And she knew from experience that she would *not* see Mama in the morning. It would be late in the afternoon before Lady Caradoc would get out of bed. She would miss the best parts of Christmas morning—checking their stockings for gifts from Saint Nicholas and giving Poppy the special doll dress Jasmine had been secretly sewing.

“Goodnight, Mama.” Jasmine found it nearly impossible to hug her mother through the stiff layers of fashionable skirts, but she awkwardly did the best she could manage.

Poppy reached up, expecting to be lifted into a hug. Mama patted her on the head, unable to fully bend down.

“Have a good hot chocolate!” Poppy called as Mama left the room, and her eyes turned from the empty doorway to Jasmine.

Catching the sadness behind that look, Jasmine immediately closed the space between them. “Do you want to get ready for our adventure?” She pulled the smaller girl into a tight hug.



A _____ in several layers of wool and fur—Jasmine and Poppy left Caradoc house and crossed the bridge into Punta.

Despite the cold, people filled the dark streets of the town. They carried muffled lanterns which gently illuminated the road under their feet, but left most everything else shrouded in darkness.

“Hurry,” Jasmine said, pulling Poppy’s hand behind her. “The lighting ceremony begins soon.”

“But it is so dark right now,” Poppy said. “Will it not be easier to see after they light the street lanterns again?”

“We will be able to see things here on the street better,” Jasmine answered. “But when it is too bright, we cannot see the stars as well.”

“That does not make sense,” Poppy replied. She pulled back against Jasmine’s hand, as if she needed to slow down in order to process this information.

“I will explain it later,” Jasmine promised. They wove their way through the old cemetery. The beautiful gravestones were covered in snow, and several had fresh bouquets of red flowers sitting next to them. The hill just above the cemetery was their destination. It was just high enough to see over most of the buildings in town, and it was kept mostly free of trees, so their view of the sky would be clear.

Jasmine was not the only one with this thought, as several other townsfolk were also walking through the cemetery toward the hill. Persephone's Veil was a highly anticipated celestial event.

Jasmine led her sister, weaving between the blankets and picnic baskets already in place. Dim lights from the windows below faded as they navigated the hill, climbing almost above the rooftops of the town. A solitary tree stood at the top, and it was the only thing blocking the light of the stars. As long as they did not sit directly below it, they would have a perfect view of the celestial beauty above. Choosing a clear spot slightly away from the other stargazers, Jasmine set up a blanket for herself and Poppy.

She dropped to her knees, stabilizing her body so she could tilt her head back to look at the sky.

"If you look at the dark sky," Jasmine told Poppy, answering her earlier question, "your eyes will get used to the darkness and see the small stars better. Just look up for a few minutes."

Poppy snuggled close to Jasmine, tilting her head against her older sister's shoulder.

"Now," Jasmine instructed after a few minutes, "look down the hill at the lantern that woman is carrying. Stare at the light for a little bit, then look back at the stars."

Poppy did as instructed. "The stars are gone!" she cried. "Well, not completely gone, but I cannot see as many now. I want to try it again." She twisted her head to look at the lantern again.

Jasmine smiled at Poppy's excitement and settled back on her heels to admire the view before she pulled out the telescope.

She inhaled through her nose, icy air slicing through her lungs in a way that made her feel awake and alive.

The sky was perfectly clear, and her mind immediately recognized the familiar patterns of her favorite constellations. The muffled voices around her faded from her consciousness, and she felt at once dwarfed and welcomed by the twinkling stars above.

A bright and beautiful new star shone above her favorite constellation. Well, technically it was not a star, but it looked like a star. Jasmine pulled out the telescope and extended it once again, aiming it at the sky to get a better first look at Persephone's Veil.

It was hard to find her place in the sky from such a magnified perspective, the telescope shaking in her hands despite her best efforts to remain still.

A deep orange speck flashed across the small area of darkness inside her scope. A beautiful trail of light arced behind it. "I found it," she said.

"Where?" Poppy asked, her voice a hushed whisper in response to Jasmine's awe.

Jasmine dropped the scope, tracing the sky with her naked eye as she formulated the words to help Poppy find it. But she knew from experience how useless pointing at a star would be, especially from Poppy's perspective. "If you look on this side of the sky," she said, "you can see three very bright stars that are kind of in a triangle."

"But all the stars are very bright," Poppy said. "And I do not see any triangles."

Jasmine looked back at the sky, searching for the right words.

"Are you looking for the comet?" a voice cut in.

Jasmine turned to see a tall person standing near their blanket. His voice sounded young, and his body was quite thin, but perhaps that was because he did

not appear to be wearing a coat.

He dropped to one knee just outside of their blanket. "Do you know how to find the Big Bear?" he asked Poppy.

"Everyone knows that," Poppy replied. "He's right there." She pointed to a constellation.

"Precisely," the boy replied. "Now use your finger to draw a line from one of the bear's eyes to the other." He used his finger in the air to demonstrate. "Now keep your finger very steady and keep drawing that line in the sky, like you are following where the bear is looking. The next star you hit is Persephone's Veil!"

Jasmine rolled her eyes. "Well, it is actually not a star—" they both said in unison.

Jasmine stopped short, shocked that the boy had corrected himself with the same words she had been saying all day. She smiled, trying to see his face better in the darkness. "That was a good description," she said.

"That was how my father taught us to navigate," he said. He slipped his hands into his pockets, holding his arms very close to his body.

"I found it!" Poppy yelled, pointing wildly upward. "That big orange one right there! Now let me see it through the telescope."

Jasmine handed her the device.

"You have a telescope?" the boy asked. "Would you let me look through it? I've never used one before." His voice squeaked, starting in a low cadence but veering into a nasally pitch.

Although she had not even looked through yet, Poppy turned and offered him the telescope. "It's hard to use," she warned. "I have done it before, and it is very wobbly. Even if you think you are holding still!"

"Maybe you could show me how to use it then?" The boy accepted the telescope and held it up to his eye, remaining companionably on his knee.

"Jasmine can show you," Poppy offered. "She knows all about telescopes. And stars."

"Does she?" the boy asked. He looked up toward Jasmine, searching for her face in the darkness.

Jasmine stood. "Not everything, but I can help you focus the scope. It is actually easiest if you lie down on your back. There is less shaking that way. Here, come on the blanket with us."

They rearranged themselves on the blanket, heads together as they looked up at the stars.

"She's absolutely beautiful," the boy said after adjusting the telescope for a few moments. "You can almost imagine what the surface looks like."

"I know!" Jasmine responded excitedly. "She was last seen over eight hundred years ago. Is that not incredible?"

The boy handed the telescope back to Poppy. He held his hands over his mouth, breathing on them for a moment. Jasmine removed the outer layer of her fur muffler and handed it to him. "Here, use this."

"Thank you." He accepted.

Jasmine tilted her head to ease the strain on her neck. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught the flaming trail of a star streaking across the sky. She gasped.

The boy gasped at the same time.

She looked over at him, unable to fully meet his eyes in the darkness. "Did you see that?" she asked.

He nodded. "The shooting star?"

"The starlight must be extra potent tonight," Jasmine said. "The flowers are likely soaking up their magic."

"The blooms will be beautiful tomorrow," the boy replied. "Even for the middle of winter."

"I will bloom beautiful tomorrow," Poppy said, joining in the conversation.

Jasmine laughed. "You will be beautiful tomorrow, but starlight does not work on humans, silly."

They continued to pass around the telescope for some time, watching the stars dance across the sky and discussing everything they knew about the celestial phenomenon happening above them.

"I'm cold," Poppy said eventually. Her voice sounded small and tired.

Jasmine took in one final look of the sweeping sky above her. Her fingers and nose were frozen. So were her toes. Well, her whole body was quite cold. But it was still hard to say goodbye to the beautiful night.

"I could stay here forever," Jasmine whispered contentedly. As soon as the words were out of her mouth, however, the distant sound of singing floated over the peaceful hill. "Is it already midnight?" She groaned.

Small lights started to pop up in the distance. A procession of townsfolk walked down the main street below them, carrying lanterns and singing Christmas carols.

"We won't be able to see any stars once they finish lighting the streetlamps," Jasmine said. "It is time to go home."

"We have a few more minutes before they get this far," the boy said.

Jasmine exhaled and took another look at Persephone's Veil, wishing her well on the next eight hundred years of her journey. She reached up toward the sky, imagining her fingers trailing along the veil of fire and soaring through the stars.

All too soon, the singing crowd below passed by the cemetery. Lamplighters led the procession, lighting each street lantern as they came across it. On any other night, the lamps would have been lit at dusk, but it was tradition on Christmas Eve to keep the streets dark until midnight, to bring in the light on the darkest night of the year.

"I am too cold," Poppy announced, standing up. "It is time for hot chocolate."

Jasmine laughed and sat up as well. The quiet magic was broken, though the newly lit street and joyfully singing crowds brought a different type of warmth to the night.

"Thank you for sharing this with me." The boy also stood. "The Veil was truly beautiful. I'm glad I got a closer look at her." He pulled the borrowed muffler from his other hand. "And thanks for this."

Jasmine accepted it back, noting his lack of layers. "You should keep it," she said.

"No, I could not," he replied, slipping his hands back into his pockets.

"Come warm up by our fire," Jasmine said, the words rushing out before she could think them through. The boy seemed relatively harmless. He was hardly older than she was, and her parents were gone. Wouldn't they want her to extend hospitality to this poor boy who clearly needed it?

An even smaller part of her felt a shimmer of joy at doing something her parents would disapprove of. It was their choice to be gone on Christmas Eve, after all. But Jasmine pushed that thought away. The boy was freezing, and the night was only going to get colder.

"Come back with us," Jasmine repeated.

"Yes!" Poppy enthusiastically agreed. "We have hot chocolate," she stated, as if that would be the deciding factor.

The boy bobbed his head.

"Did you just agree to come back with us, or was that a shiver?" Jasmine asked. The slight movement could have been either.

"Yes," he said. "I like hot chocolate." He nodded more vigorously.

"Good." Jasmine took Poppy's hand and led the way back down the hill. "We will have to be quiet, though, or Miss Briar will come check on us."

Jasmine led them home, over the river and through the iced-over front garden.

"Why did we pass the front door?" Poppy asked.

"Hush," Jasmine said, leading them around back to the kitchen door. She turned to the boy. "What is your name?"

"Barrett," he replied nervously. "I did not mean to get you into trouble. I mostly just followed to make sure you got home safe. Thank you for sharing the telescope. I should go . . . now, though." He stepped back.

"Wait!" Jasmine said. "My parents would not mind at all, but they are gone tonight. We just want to avoid the governess."

He still hesitated.

"I want you to stay," Jasmine said, realizing the words were true as she said them. "We have only just become friends. Do not leave now."

Barrett stepped back toward them. It was still quite dark, but Jasmine could see a small smile on his face.

She smiled in return. "You stay here," she said, handing him the fur layer from her muffler again. "We are going through the front door, and I will come and get you after we are certain that Miss Briar is gone to bed."

Barrett nodded.

Jasmine grinned back at him, her heart racing. This was fun.

She and Poppy went back around the front of the house and slipped inside the front door.

As predicted, a middle-aged woman in her dressing gown appeared a few moments later, following them to the nursery. "Did you see the star?" she asked, yawning.

Jasmine winced but nodded. She had no desire to explain yet again that Persephone's Veil was not a star.

"You must be completely frozen," Miss Briar continued. She bustled around Poppy, helping the younger girl to unwind her scarf and cloak.

"You look exhausted, Miss Briar," Jasmine said, stepping in to help. "I can take care of this. You can go on to bed. We are going to stay up and make hot chocolate. Please do not wait for us."

The governess folded Poppy's outer layers and hung them near the still-roaring fire. "Oh alright, I can leave you to your fun. Just be careful and do not burn yourselves."

The woman helped Jasmine out of her cloak and hat and gloves as well, although Jasmine tried to dissuade her.

Then, finally, with another yawn, Miss Briar left the room.

Jasmine shifted her weight from one foot to the other, waiting impatiently to make sure the governess really had gone to bed. Then, she dashed down the hallway to unlock and open the back kitchen door.

Barrett was still there.

"Come inside," Jasmine said. "You must be completely frozen." She echoed Miss Briar's words. "Slip off your boots here," she instructed as Barrett stepped tentatively into the room. "But carry them with us so they can dry by the fire."

Barrett did as instructed and tip-toed after Jasmine to the nursery.

Once in the light of the fire, with the door closed safely behind them, Jasmine got a look at their new friend. He was quite tall, but younger than his height suggested, perhaps her own age. He had dark, curly hair, and a shy smile.

He was smiling now, as he looked around the room. One of his cheeks dimpled in, making his smile adorably lopsided. His eyes were dark brown, soft, and kind. And his interactions with them had been kinder still. His ears were bright red from the cold, on the verge of turning blue.

"Take off your coat and warm up by the fire," Jasmine said, reaching for his thin jacket. She draped it over a chair close to the fire and gently brushed away the snow and ice that clung to it.

"Make hot chocolate with me," Poppy said, drawing him closer to the fire and welcoming him into the room.

"Do you live in Punta?" Jasmine asked. He had seemed unfamiliar with the streets on their way back to Caradoc house.

Barrett shook his head, holding his hands out to the fire. "I've just traveled from Virmur. I'm looking for work."

"You look awfully young to be traveling so far on your own and looking for work," Jasmine commented.

Barrett shrugged. "There ain't much work in Virmur. Not much food either."

"Did you walk all the way from Virmur today?" Jasmine asked.

Barrett hesitated, then nodded.

Any remaining hesitation about inviting him into their home completely dissipated at that. He had nowhere else to go.

Jasmine settled in front of the fire, arranging the treats within easy reach. She had a feeling she could easily stay awake until the first light of dawn.

CHAPTER 2

Seven Years Later

“Welcome! Ladies and Gentlemen!” a confident male voice reverberated from every corner of the darkened room. “Welcome to the first ever Astronomical World Fair!”

“This is incredible!” Jasmine yelled through the cheering crowd. Grasping Poppy’s hands for balance, she tilted her head back as far as possible to gaze up at the stars—only this time, the stars were fake.

“Can you believe the sun is fully up right now?!” Poppy’s energy outmatched even Jasmine’s. She tilted to the side, spinning Jasmine around as they enjoyed the spectacle.

It was indeed late in the morning, and they stood in the antechamber of a large hall. The room was quite dim, lit only by the hundreds of sparkling electrical lights in the ceiling above them.

And they were hardly alone in their excitement. The room around them was packed full, everyone staring upward, jaws agape, voices hushed.

A thick, unfamiliar noise whirled in the background. Jasmine guessed it belonged to the machine that powered the fake stars. The new sound added to the otherworldly atmosphere.

“What you are about to witness,” the loud voice continued over some sort of speaking trumpet, “is every latest cutting-edge advancement in magic and technology!”

As he spoke, several of the “stars” on the ceiling swung through the makeshift sky like shooting stars. The entire crowd gasped, then clapped in excitement. The flying light sources illuminated their open mouths and shining eyes.

Jasmine cheered along with the crowd. She’d been looking forward to this event for several months. She smiled to herself. Christmas Eve was only three days away, but surprisingly, she’d been even more excited for today.

She still considered Christmas Eve to be her favorite day, but it had lost some of its charm over the years. And this year would be even more different, now that Poppy was married and had moved to the other side of town.

But this event marked the first time that astronomers and scientists had come together to explore new technologies and discover how the magic of starlight worked. For Jasmine, it was Christmas.

Several tall doors on the far side of the antechamber swung open, letting daylight stream into the darkened room and welcoming guests to enter the massive

town hall that had been built for the occasion.

Jasmine squeezed Poppy's hand so they would not be separated as they flowed forward in the rush of the crowd. She tried to catch a final glimpse of the artificial lights above, but the incoming sunshine far overpowered them. She could come back when the room was dark and see them again.

"This is even more beautiful!" Poppy exclaimed as they entered the central building. "If that is even possible! Look!"

Jasmine craned her neck to see over the swimming crowd of top hats and flowered brims crushing in around her.

"No, up!" Poppy pointed.

Jasmine tilted her head back once again. The ceiling of the main hall was made entirely of glass. Jasmine's squeal of delight was drowned by the collective gasp of the crowd. Apparently no one had been expecting this surprise.

They were inside a massive building—she could see the brick walls around them. But daylight streamed into every corner of the room from overhead, making it feel like they were out of doors at the same time.

The main hall extended far in front of her. While she could see little of what was on the floor, due to the density of people, several hanging banners promised exciting exhibits.

"Do you like what you see, Miss Caradoc?" The loud masculine voice sounded directly in her ear rather than over the speaking trumpet. The surprise nearly threw her off balance, but fortunately, she still had a tight grip on Poppy's hand.

"Mr. Bannack," she gasped, covering her surprise.

The man bowed over her hand. As he straightened, Jasmine smiled. They were the same height, and she liked the feeling of looking at a man directly eye to eye. He wore his hair in a fashionable powdered white that gave him an air of wisdom far beyond his age. If Jasmine had to guess, he was a handful of years older than herself. The thin, wiry length of his powdered beard had yet to fill out his face, but she supposed he was beyond the age where that could change.

"Ivran, please," he said. She did not know Mr. Bannack well, as his recent business success had only just brought him into the higher social circles of the city, but this was not the first time he had singled her out.

"I love what I see," Jasmine said, looking anywhere but at his face. "It is . . . impossibly beautiful." She gestured to the hall around her. "How did you manage to build this under our very noses?"

"A lot of gold," he said with a wry chuckle, "some very good workmen, and free rein from the city council." He smiled, well-earned pride on his face.

"I think you have surprised the entire city," Jasmine praised. "We all knew your world fair would bring business and travelers to Punta, but to build something this beautiful and permanent for the use of the city—" Jasmine ended her rambling. "I don't think Punta will ever be able to thank you enough for gracing her with this masterpiece. And even the marchioness approves, hosting her Christmas Eve Ball here as one of the opening events!"

He nodded enthusiastically. "Seeing as I get to use the adjoining space for my business offices, I hardly have any complaints in the matter. It really was all for myself, you see." He bowed his head. "Speaking of business, I have a few matters to see to—but please, allow me to escort you through the exhibits later this morning?"

Jasmine smiled. She did not want to wait another moment before spending hours at each exhibit. But she nodded. What better way to view the Astronomical World Fair than on the arm of its largest patron? "Thank you," she said.

Poppy dug her elbow into Jasmine's ribs as Ivran Bannack walked away. "He is too pale," Poppy said. "Almost to the point of being sickly."

"Poppy!" Jasmine covered her mouth, hoping no one had heard her sister's rude comment but unable to stop the bubble of laughter that it caused in her throat. "Let us find Edward."

"He intends to court you," Poppy said.

"Edward courting me?" Jasmine retorted. "That is scandalous!"

"Mr. Bannack," Poppy said, not amused by Jasmine's joke. Poppy pulled Jasmine against the flow of the crowd, back into the starlit antechamber. "Edward will find us when he has a moment."

Poppy pulled Jasmine to a stop against the side wall of the dim room. "What do you think of Mr. Bannack?"

Jasmine shrugged. She did not want to discuss Mr. Bannack. "How is life as Mrs. Hilliard?" she asked instead, eliciting a smile from Poppy. Before today, Jasmine had not seen her sister since the wedding two weeks prior. Since Poppy's husband did not have the funds to take them on a wedding tour, Jasmine had been intentionally giving her sister time to adjust to her new life.

"Absolutely perfect," Poppy replied. "The cottage is lovely. I cannot wait for you to see it."

"I shall come over tomorrow," Jasmine replied. "If you will have me."

"Only if you tell me how you feel about Mr. Bannack," Poppy countered. "He has become quite persistent of late."

"Let us go look at the exhibits," Jasmine said. "I do not wish to speak of him."

Poppy's face softened. "You feel nothing for him, then?"

Jasmine shook her head. She'd had her fair share of suitors over the last few years, refined gentlemen who had connections at court or wanted to get closer to her father. But none of those men had made her smile the way Poppy smiled about Edward. Edward was wonderful. He was calm, intelligent, and easy to converse with.

In a moment of brutal clarity, Jasmine realized she was jealous of her younger sister. She wasn't jealous of Edward himself; rather, she was jealous of the easygoing relationship Poppy had built with him.

"Tell me about Edward," Jasmine said, pushing her lonely thoughts out of her mind. "Do you argue every day?" She raised her eyebrows teasingly.

"We have decided to be cross with each other only once a week," Poppy replied, sticking her nose in the air. "It is working out quite well. Every day with Edward, whether we are cross or not, is wonderful because it is with Edward." Her smile turned more genuine. "He is the only other person in the world who has a heart as beautiful and strong and fierce as yours, and he loves me with that heart. You deserve that as well, Jasmine."

Jasmine shook her head. "Imagine if any one of my suitors had a heart larger than his love of himself." She tried to smile, but the words suddenly felt too real. She looked up at the stars overhead, visible now that someone had closed the doors to the main hall.

Poppy, ever too perceptive, leaned into Jasmine's side with a warm hug. "Jasmine . . ." She sighed.

Jasmine closed her eyes. The only time she had experienced a combination of both spark and comfort had been on that Christmas Eve all those years ago. She held back a strangled laugh. She had been just a girl, and the stranger that night only a boy. That wasn't love, but it had been a deep moment of connection. She wondered, as she often had, what had become of Barrett. He'd left in the early

morning hours of Christmas Day. And though they'd encouraged him to return, they had never seen him again.

"Perhaps it is me," Jasmine said, still looking up, voicing a thought she had never shared. "Maybe I need to accept what is right in front of me."

Poppy laughed, pushing her sister away. "You are not the problem, you ancient old astronomer," Poppy said. "Come. Let us go look at some star maps or something. Edward should have joined us by now."

Jasmine laughed out loud, grinning away her melancholy. "Yes, let's." She smiled at Poppy.

They pushed open the tall doors to the main hall.

"There he is," Poppy said, pointing to a tall man who was mostly obscured by a makeshift wall along the side of the room. "Edward!" Poppy called.

He appeared not to have heard them above the ambient noise. But as they got closer, it became clear that he was conversing with someone who was still hidden by the wall. Edward's face was red, and he was nodding repeatedly.

Poppy picked up her pace, pulling Jasmine along with her.

As they rounded the wall, Jasmine saw a short man with hair so pale it was nearly white. Ivran?

"The delivery needs to be today, Edward." He paused, his face hard as granite, his words almost dangerous. "Do you understand?"

Poppy ran forward to stand at Edward's side. Edward flinched at the touch, noticing Poppy's presence. Standing tall, he faced Ivran directly. "Yes, of course. I will do it personally."

"It is already past due," Ivran continued. His eyes fell to Poppy, then to Jasmine behind her. His expression softened. "Miss Caradoc," he said.

"I was just looking for you," Jasmine said smoothly, inserting herself into the group. She slipped her hand onto Ivran's arm, inviting his attention to herself and removing it from Edward. "Mr. Bannack," she said. "I believe I was offered a tour of the exhibits?"

"Of course." Ivran gestured around Edward and Poppy, leading Jasmine forward. As he passed Edward, Ivran paused. "See to it," he said, his voice stern once again. He moved forward, not waiting for a response.

Edward nodded behind his back. "Yes, sir. Immediately."

Jasmine looked back at Poppy, trying to catch her eye, but Poppy's focus was entirely on Edward.

CHAPTER 3

Jasmine sighed, realizing that Poppy would likely not be able to spend the day with Edward as planned.

Edward worked for Mr. Bannack as the harbormaster of Port Virmur. Jasmine had no idea what his responsibilities at the world fair could be, but she also had trouble believing that dependable Edward could do anything wrong.

Ivran, however, had clearly grown his business far beyond just a shipping company. Whatever the current stress, Jasmine was happy to defuse the situation.

They stepped back into the main thoroughfare, and Jasmine lost herself once again to the excitement of the event. The crowds were still dense, but people had moved further into the hall, revealing a clearer view of the space. Booths, tables, and even large tents were arranged in rows along the length of the hall.

An astronomy exhibit directly in front of them appeared to consist of several tall pillars with multi-dimensional star fields, and Jasmine could make out some star maps on a raised table as well. A sign hanging above them read: *Shaping the Stars, a New World of Discovery*.

Jasmine immediately veered toward it.

Ivran did not notice her excitement as he steered them in a different direction. He passed the first several exhibits without a glance, and Jasmine nearly tripped trying to keep up with him.

When he made to pass the central exhibit—*Magic Meets Machine, Making Electric Stars*—she forcefully stopped. Wherever Ivran was leading them could wait a moment.

An animated man shouted into a speaking trumpet. “The incredible experience you just viewed was a combination of star magic and engineering!”

Jasmine thought he sounded like a salesman, even if the only thing he was selling was information given freely.

“Using the light of the stars at night,” he continued, “we can not only capture but store enough star power to recreate the light of the stars during the day. Imagine what the world could do with more of this technology? If we had the power to use the energy of the stars to power much more than that during the day? This is what the scientists at Punta Laboratory are working to uncover. Donate now to fund this new wave of the future!”

And there was the sales pitch.

Jasmine waited a moment for him to continue explaining the science behind the new lights, but he only kept asking for donations.

“B Jasmine asked Ivran. As the owner of the building, surely he would know. “Magic is only accessible by night.”

“It’s a simple mechanism, really,” Ivran responded, moving her along once again. “By using glass to capture the reflection of the stars at night, they were able to save and store some of that energy for use during the day. It’s a weak system at the moment, but the possibilities are enticing.”

“So you are an avid supporter of the Laboratory, then?” Jasmine guessed, seeing the way his eyes lit up.

“Indeed I am.” Ivran dipped his head in acknowledgement.

“I congratulate Bannack Shipping on their continued generosity to the community.” Jasmine’s praise was genuine, but her mind was still on the lights. “Could you use the lights you have created and this glass system of storing their power to generate a self-sustaining system?”

“I like the way you think, Miss Caradoc.” Ivran raised his eyebrows in almost mock admiration. “Unfortunately, the stars we created do not have the magic of the real stars, so the cycle ends there. But perhaps someday?” He nodded, then stepped forward again with purpose.

Having passed the main exhibits, Ivran led them to a raised stage at the back of the room. The stage was covered in dark velvet and surrounded by a waist-high fence made of polished mahogany. A handful of the city’s finest lords and ladies stood upon the raised platform, leaning against the rail and watching the goings-on below.

Two guards stood in front of the velvet-covered stairs leading up the stage. They melted to the side as Ivran approached, letting him pass without question.

Ivran slowed his intent pace at the stairs to let Jasmine gather her skirts and step up. He then gestured to a cloth-covered table at the center of the stage. A finely dressed older woman sat at the table, talking to the surrounding lords.

“Marchioness,” Ivran said, announcing their presence as he bowed over the hand of the highest-ranking noblewoman in Punta. He turned to Jasmine. “Have you met Miss Caradoc?” he asked. “The daughter of the captain of constables, Lord Caradoc?”

Jasmine curtsied to the older woman. They had indeed met several times, mostly at the annual Christmas Eve Ball.

“Indeed, lovely to see you, Miss Caradoc,” the marchioness acknowledged her.

Ivran stepped to the woman’s side, inserting himself into the conversation with the marquess and other lords.

Jasmine smiled pleasantly, though inwardly she was confused. This was not the tour of the exhibits she had expected—or desired—and Ivran seemed in no hurry to return to the main floor.

He was content to have her on his arm.

Jasmine tapped her toes beneath her dress, eyeing the exhibits as longingly as she could. Somehow, standing next to small-statured Ivran now, she felt even more insignificant, as though she ought to shrink into herself and take up less space so that he could be more comfortable and impress the men around them. That seemed all he was intent upon doing.

It would be rude to step away from the group so soon, but Jasmine caught a familiar face in the crowd. She gently nudged Ivran’s upper arm. “My parents have arrived,” she whispered.

Rather predictably, his face lit up and he glanced back out toward the crowds. “Excuse us, gentlemen,” he said. “Marchioness.” He nodded to the lady.

Jasmine held back a small smile as she gained her wish, though she had doubts about leading Ivran Bannack straight to her parents. Hopefully it would be the “lesser evil” and not “out of the frying pan into the fire.”

“Mama!” she called as they approached. “Is the fair not spectacular?”

Lady Caradoc positively beamed when she saw who was accompanying Jasmine. “Mr. Bannack,” she said. “How lovely to see you.”

“Lady Caradoc.” Ivran bowed, all smiles. He turned to Jasmine’s father and extended a hand. “Lord Caradoc.”

Her father looked at Jasmine before extending his hand to Ivran. “Mr. Bannack.” He looked down at the man while he shook his hand.

Jasmine knew her father could be intimidating even on the best of days. He was a man not only born into power, but one who spent every day carrying out the responsibility allotted to him. And as that responsibility involved ensuring the safety of Punta from criminal activity, he was often as serious as he appeared.

“An impressive event you have pulled together,” her father said, his face still solemn. “Bannack Shipping must be doing quite well?”

“Yes, of course.” Ivran smiled, stretching his neck to stand taller. “Thank you for noticing. We are doing quite well.”

“I understand there were delays over the last few days with the new customs officer?” Lord Caradoc asked, raising an eyebrow and relaxing his stance.

Ivran nodded, throwing his hands out in exaggerated frustration. “It has consumed my every spare moment, not that I have many of those these days.” He smiled and shook his head. “But it is no matter. Everything is getting sorted.”

Jasmine took a step back, happy to excuse herself from the conversation. The gentlemen jumped easily into their discussion of business, hardly noticing her departure.

She smiled, finally free to explore.

CHAPTER 4

Jasmine carefully unwrapped a package of crumpled brown paper to reveal a porcelain figurine. The figure depicted a small shepherd boy. He stood on a grassy base next to a round, wooly sheep who was nudging him off balance. The boy's face was turned downward, looking at something unseen with an expression of joy and awe.

Jasmine smiled at the little sheep. Although the figurines only came out during Christmastime, it was like greeting a familiar friend. She knew every twist and curl in the sheep's porcelain-wool coat. She loved the way the shepherd boy's foot was lifted off the grass where the sheep nudged into him.

She placed him on the mantle next to the other figures. The family sitting room was decorated for Christmas the same as it was each year. Candles, ribbons, and holly wreaths graced the mantle, door, and windows. The elegant touches, put out by the maidservant, were a far cry from the haphazard decorations of their childhood nursery.

Though they no longer strung beads and crocheted snowflakes, Jasmine and Poppy always unwrapped the delicate figurines together. Mama was quite happy to leave the decorating to the servants, so this year Jasmine unwrapped them alone. And while she loved unwrapping each figure, the feelings of nostalgia were more bitter than sweet this year.

She'd visited Poppy's small cottage the day before. It had been lovely to see Poppy's new home, but it made coming back to Caradoc house even more difficult. Jasmine had not adjusted to the new emptiness at home, nor was she trying to acclimate herself to it.

She unwrapped the last figurine—a single sheep lying in the grass—and lifted it carefully over the mantle.

"You may want to start getting ready for the Christmas Eve Ball." Mama's voice startled Jasmine, and she nearly dropped the porcelain sheep.

"I did not hear you come in," Jasmine said, placing the sheep and stepping away from the mantle. "Come see the final decorations."

"It looks lovely, darling," Mama said, looping her arm into Jasmine's. "But leave the decorating for the servants and prepare yourself for Lord Ivran's ball."

Jasmine checked the tall clock face on the other side of the room. "He's not a lord yet, Mama. And it's still the marchioness's ball, even if she is hosting it at the Bannack Hall this year. And it's not even noon. I have hours yet to prepare."

Mama stared at the small figurines as though she had not heard Jasmine. “One daughter happily married, and another soon to be. What a wonderful year for the Caradocs.”

“Mama?” Jasmine asked, practically scolding. “What are you not telling me?”

“A certain Mr. Bannack paid a visit to your father and me this morning.” Lady Caradoc beamed at Jasmine.

“Excuse me?” Jasmine stepped away from her mother’s side. She felt a mild surprise. She had expected Ivran to make his intentions clear, but not for him to propose so soon. She waited for the surprise to turn into excitement. Or panic.

But she felt . . . nothing.

If anything, she was disappointed in herself for feeling nothing. She turned to face her mother.

“Perhaps tonight, you will be the belle of the ball,” Mama said. “Is it not the perfect way to spend Christmas Eve?”

Jasmine smiled at her mother’s eagerness. Her smile was genuine, and she hoped it hid the emptiness inside her. She nodded.

“I’ve already called for a bath,” Mama continued. “Hurry now, before it goes cold.”

Jasmine nodded again and left the room, eager to be alone. There it was, a touch of shock.

Maybe she was surprised. She had known this was coming, of course, but she had not expected it tonight. Not on Christmas Eve. Not on her favorite day of the year—even if it had lost some of its excitement since she’d grown up.

Needing a few more moments to be alone, Jasmine slipped inside the old nursery before having to face her maidservant.

The room looked very much the same as when she and Poppy had used it as their schoolroom and play space. Now it was empty, waiting for the next generation of Caradoc children to be reared here.

The next generation of Caradoc children. That would be her own children. As she was the eldest daughter with no brothers, Jasmine and her husband would inherit the titles of Lord and Lady Caradoc, along with the house and all her parents’ assets. So that was why Mama had called him Lord Ivran.

Jasmine continued down the hall to her own room. She should be happy for herself tonight. She was getting engaged after all!

But as she went through the familiar motions of scrubbing her skin and washing her hair, she felt annoyed that she would spend the evening feigning excitement instead of enjoying her favorite day.

She sighed, knowing that Ivran would likely propose in front of the entire city tonight. It would be an exhausting affair, assuring Ivran that she was happy and accepting the congratulations of every family at the ball.

Or.

And she giggled at the thought. She could turn him down in front of all the noblemen he so wanted to impress.

She sank completely under the water, rinsing the final bit of soap from her hair.

No, that would not make her happy either.

If she really wanted to feel happy, she would leap out of the tub, dress in her warmest clothes and trek across town to spend the evening with Poppy and Edward. The Hilliards had not been invited to the Christmas Eve Ball.

She squeezed the water out of her hair. That was not such a bad idea. The only time in her life that she had ever sneaked in any way was when she had brought Barrett back home on Miss Briar’s watch. But sneaking over to Poppy’s suddenly

sounded like a delightful way to avoid a question she did not want to deal with answering.

She grinned, standing from the tub and reaching for the towel. Ivran would still propose at a later date, of course, but that would be a problem for after Christmas.

Jasmine dried herself, then slipped into her nightgown and sat on the edge of her bed. She slapped her cheeks to make them look flushed, then jumped up to the vanity to search for her face oil in the top right drawer.

She rubbed a copious amount on her face. Catching herself in the mirror, she grinned at the appearance of excessive perspiration.

She jumped back into bed, kicking her feet to dishevel the bedding. Grabbing the folded kerchief on her bedside table, she fluffed it open and crumpled it between her hands as though she had been using it to tend a runny nose. She carefully arranged the messy kerchief back on the table then laid back and pulled the blankets up to her neck.

Feeling satisfied, she rang the bell for her maid. "Could you inform Mother that I am too ill to accompany her tonight?" Jasmine asked, throwing in a cough for good measure.

As the maid left the room, Jasmine pinched her cheeks some more. Mama was no fool. She had been married to father for so long, she was practically the chief of constables herself.

Jasmine needed one final touch.

She threw off the blankets and dashed back to her vanity. The bottom drawer on the left was her own personal medicine cabinet. She rifled through the glass bottles of tonics and salves and linen bags of waxed-paper wrapped lozenges until she found a skinny vial containing a white swab soaking in clear liquid.

Perfect. She uncorked the bottle and removed the swab, rolling its cotton head against the side of the glass to expel as much moisture as possible.

Opening the top right drawer of her wooden vanity, she perused her jars of vanishing creams, castile soaps, and facial jellies.

She settled for a small jar of pearl powder that she'd only used once. She really should have thrown it out immediately, as it had made her entire face and neck break out in an angry red rash. But for some reason she had kept it, and now it was exactly what she needed.

Opening the jar, she dipped the cotton head of the swab into the shimmery powder. Twisting the swab for full coverage, she removed it from the powder and hurriedly replaced the jars and closed the drawers.

Taking the swab with her, she dashed back to bed. The liquid soaked cotton was already turning a greenish-brown hue, reacting to some contaminant within the powder.

She placed the swab on her bedside table, resting it on the crumpled handkerchief.

A rapid knock sounded on the door.

Jasmine dove under the blankets, pulling them up to her neck. "Come in," she said as weakly as she could muster. She felt a bubble of laughter at her own ruse. Catching it, she quickly turned it into a cough.

"Darling." Mother sailed through the door. Her open arms reached toward the bed, but she stopped short halfway across the room. "Shall I send for the physician? Are you alright? You were fine this morning!" She craned her neck to peer at Jasmine without moving closer to the bed.

Jasmine shook her head with an exaggerated moan. "I am sure I will be fine soon. I just . . ." She closed her eyes, twisting her mouth into an appropriately

pained expression.

"You must be quite overcome with excitement," Mama said. "I should not have told you about Lord Ivran's visit. Let me send for a—"

"I have already taken one, Mama," Jasmine cut in, pointing to the swab on her bedside table.

"Oh?" Lady Caradoc's eyes went wide. "Oh. That is quite dark. But it does not look too bad. Surely you can get up and come to the ball for a little while?"

"I really do not think that is a good idea," Jasmine replied, closing her eyes to suppress the mild horror she felt that her mother would push past clear evidence of contamination. "I would not want to make anyone else ill."

"You only have to stay as long as the proposal," Mother pleaded, wringing her hands. "You can be ill for as long as you need after tonight."

Jasmine opened her eyes, looking at her mother's disappointed face. Her mother cared more about a picture-perfect proposal than her own daughter's health. For a moment, Jasmine felt actually sick to her stomach as a flash of anger washed over her. She turned her face away, closing her eyes once again to sell the sickness. "No, Mama."

Her mother remained in the room for several long seconds before finally stepping back to the door. "Well, it will be a disappointment, but of course you must take care of yourself. And never fear"—her voice brightened—"Lord Ivran's affections are quite set on you. Do not worry. This won't deter his proposal, I am sure of it."

"I am well aware of that," Jasmine murmured. "Please give him my best."

CHAPTER 5

“Jasmine! You look completely frozen. Where’s the carriage?” Poppy stood in the doorframe of her small cottage. She peered around Jasmine, looking into the dark street. “Did you walk all the way here?”

Jasmine nodded, feeling quite close to actually frozen. She stepped around her sister, inviting herself into the warmth of the house.

Unfastening her cape, she dropped it over a hook on the wall.

“Should you not be at the Christmas Eve Ball?” Poppy continued to ask questions.

“I told Mama I was too ill to go.” Jasmine smirked as she pinched the end of each finger on her glove, loosening them to pull it off. She glanced around the small living room, eyes riveted on the blazing fire in the hearth across the room. “I do not want anyone to know I actually left the house,” Jasmine whispered conspiratorially, then laughed as she slipped off her boots and hurried toward the roaring flames.

Jasmine shivered as the heat of the fire enveloped her numb fingers and face. Despite the increasing discomfort, she smiled. The small room reminded her of their old nursery. Poppy had decorated for Christmas just like they used to. Strands of wooden beads hung over the windows and mantel.

Jasmine noticed that Poppy still preferred to string the beads in no particular order, and just that small familiarity made her eyes water. Or maybe it was only the heat from the fire.

Finally, Jasmine turned around, warming her back as she faced her younger sister. Poppy’s face was tearstained, her eyes red and puffy.

“Poppy!” Jasmine cried. “What’s wrong? Where is Edward?” Jasmine left the fire to step toward her.

Poppy inhaled through her nose, sniffing. “He’s unharmed.”

Jasmine felt a panic rise in her throat. That was not a great start to any explanation.

“But he was late,” Poppy continued. “He was supposed to come home this morning. From Virmur. He was at the port there. But there was a fire.”

“A fire?” Jasmine echoed.

“At the port. Last night. Edward is unharmed,” Poppy babbled, repeating herself. “But the port, the warehouses, the docks, even some of the ships. Destroyed. A messenger arrived just a few hours ago to explain why Edward was not home yet.”

Jasmine grasped Poppy's shoulders and guided her to the sofa. "Was anyone else hurt?" Jasmine asked, gently forcing Poppy to sit down.

"I don't know," Poppy moaned. "I wanted to go there immediately, but I have no way of traveling that far in the dark and snow."

"Why did you not send for me?" Jasmine asked, shocked that Poppy had not reached out. "Or at least alert Papa?"

"There's nothing you can do about it!" Poppy wailed. "And I only just received the news. I have not been able to do much except for worry."

"Edward is safe," Jasmine reassured her. "He is a good manager and a smart man. He will not recklessly put himself in danger. The worst is over."

"I . . . I don't think that it is." Poppy started crying again, an intense sort of quiet crying, her tears flowing rapidly and chest heaving silently.

"Poppy?" Jasmine asked, heart racing. She knelt on the floor in front of the sofa. "What is it? You can tell me. I am here."

"You should be at the ball," Poppy managed to whisper, covering her face with her hands.

"Poppy!" Jasmine's voice sounded concerned but also harsh, exasperated.

"The messenger . . ." Poppy took a few deep breaths, calming herself. "Was a friend. Who works with Edward."

"That makes sense." Jasmine struggled to see the problem.

"He said Mr. Bannack was in quite a state." Poppy looked up at Jasmine through teary eyes, her face serious.

Jasmine scanned her sister's face, trying to pick up on the hidden meaning she was trying to convey. "He must have been understandably upset about the fire," Jasmine prompted.

"Virmur has the largest space for storing goods. The warehouses are completely destroyed. It's all Edward's fault and Mr. Bannack will make him pay!" Poppy's whole body shook with anxiety.

Jasmine placed her hands on Poppy's knees, running her thumbs in circular motions as she attempted to calm her.

"That's preposterous," Jasmine said. "Ivran is a businessman, but he is not vindictive. Surely, this was an accident and it will all be sorted."

Poppy shook her head. "He said, 'Edward will pay.'"

Jasmine narrowed her eyes. "He can not—he *would* not—place the entire responsibility of his business on one man's shoulders." She had no desire to defend her soon-to-be betrothed, but this also sounded vastly different from the refined, self-conscious man she knew.

Poppy still trembled. "He could fire Edward. Label him an arsonist and ensure that no other business will ever hire him. He will evict us from this cottage, which he owns. And Edward will be sent to debtors' prison, and not even three lifetimes of wages would be enough to replace what he has lost."

"Now you are being foolish," Jasmine said. "The fire is a horrible thing, but a business as successful as Ivran's can surely manage to recover."

A loud knock sounded at the door. Poppy startled.

Jasmine jumped to her feet, heading toward the door. "Are you expecting anyone?"

Poppy shook her head. "Only Bannack's bully-backs to evict us from this cottage." Her tone was mocking, but the fear in her eyes was real.

Jasmine reached for the door handle, wishing she could see who was on the other side. "No one is heartless enough to do that, especially on Christmas Eve," she said. "It is likely more news from Edward. Good news."

She opened the door.

The street was completely dark, so only the light from the fire inside the room illuminated the large man who towered over the door frame. His thick fur jacket matched the dark brown color of his beard and long hair. Jasmine was not sure where his facial hair ended and his coat began. The additional layer of snowflakes over his hat, beard, and coat did not help.

"Mrs. Hilliard?" he asked, his voice low and rough, chapped from the cold.

Jasmine waved a hand toward Poppy, who now stood by the sofa. "No, Mrs. Hill—" Her voice stopped abruptly as she caught sight of his eyes.

Deep brown eyes.

Older and far more striking than she remembered, but eyes that she definitely knew.

Eyes that she had committed to memory, could not forget even if she wanted to.

"Barrett?" she whispered, her eyes scanning his face for other signs of recognition. He looked vaguely familiar, like an older, hardened version of Edward.

The man tilted his head to the side, responding to the name but still trying to make out her face.

She took a step back into the light.

"Jasmine?" he said. Her name came slowly, as though from deep in his memory.

"It is you!" Jasmine wanted to throw her arms around this stranger, snowy jacket and all.

But he was not a stranger. She instantly felt as though she were in the presence of an old friend. "And you remember me?" She blinked as an icy blast of wind swept through the doorway. "How are you here? Where have you been? You never came back to us, and we had no way to find you. I went to the hill above the cemetery for years, hoping you would be there . . ." Jasmine closed her mouth, feeling vulnerable at having shared so much. She had never meant to tell anyone—ever—about those foolish longing-filled daydreams.

"You are Edward's wife?" Barrett still stood outside the door, too surprised to move.

Jasmine stepped away from the doorframe, inviting him with her hand to enter. "Poppy! It's Barrett!" She turned her body toward her sister but kept her eyes steadily on Barrett, as if she did not believe he was real.

Poppy did not appear as excited as Jasmine. "Why are you here?" she asked Barrett, her voice shrill and accusatory. "What news from Edward?"

Barrett stepped inside the cottage, ducking his head to fit through the doorway. He immediately removed his hat, revealing a head of thick, dark curls. "My ship just landed at Port Punta. I heard news of the fire at Port Virmur and came immediately to see how Edward is faring." He turned from Poppy to Jasmine. "Where is he? Has there been no word?"

"He is unharmed," Jasmine replied. "To our latest knowledge." She closed the door behind Barrett.

Barrett immediately put the hat back on his head. "I'll head to Virmur to see what can be done."

"I'm coming with you," Poppy declared.

"I can travel faster alone," Barrett replied. "Stay with your sister. She needs all the support she can get."

Poppy sent a confused glance to Jasmine but continued speaking to Barrett. "I am not going to sit here waiting, nor am I going to slow you down." She grabbed her own cloak from the wall as she spoke.

“If I know anything about Ivran Bannack—and I do; I’ve worked for the man for seven years—he is not going to take this news lightly.” Barrett’s voice was so deep that it shook the whole house. He was not speaking loudly, but he was clearly in the habit of making his voice carry. “That man protects his wares like a dragon hoarding treasure. For all I know, it is mostly the ginever that goes through Virmur. But that’s valued enough. I do not envy the man who is going to be held responsible for this tragedy, mishap or not. So stay with your sister, because she and her husband are going to need all the support they can get.”

Jasmine was too stunned by the force of his words to immediately respond.

Barrett was already reaching for the door handle, not waiting to see the reaction to his words.

But before he even touched it, the door slammed open, knocking into him. He stepped back, tripping over his own feet, as Edward entered the room. Behind him, two large, uniformed bully-backs pushed their way into the room.

Jasmine shrank back, not that she was afraid. Between Barrett and the hired muscle, she was in the presence of three of the largest men she had ever seen. While standing in one of the smallest rooms she had ever been in.

The tiny cottage suddenly felt suffocating.

“Edward!” Poppy pushed past Jasmine and flung herself into Edward’s arms. She frantically tried to throw both arms around him while simultaneously checking every angle of his face with her hands. “Are you alright?” He was covered in soot, ash, and snow, but otherwise he appeared unharmed.

They embraced in the doorway as if they were the only two people in the room.

Barrett stared at them, confused, then looked to Jasmine. He sidestepped closer to her, leaning down to whisper, “I take it you are not Mrs. Hilliard?”

Jasmine rolled her eyes. “Clearly,” she whispered back. “You did not bother to wait for an answer.”

Edward was still hugging Poppy, holding her close and breathing her in, before he lifted his head to survey the rest of the room. “Jas . . . Barrett!” Shock and relief flashed across Edward’s face. “You’re here.”

Barrett clasped his brother’s shoulder. “I came to congratulate you and the new missus. But I heard the news as soon as we landed. How bad is it?”

Edward turned to the two bully-backs, who had followed him inside the room and were standing against the closed door. “Out.”

“We’ve our orders not to leave you until the constable arrives,” the shorter one—who was still taller than half the people in the room—replied.

Edward gestured around the interior of the cottage. “There’s no other exit. Get out.”

The two men looked at each other, uncertain. Barrett gave them a nod.

They clearly respected him, as they shrugged their shoulders and went out the front door.

Edward sank to the sofa as soon as the door shut, his face as white as snow. “It’s bad.”

Poppy sat next to him while Jasmine and Barrett hovered around the sofa.

“Three ships are sunk,” Edward said. “I’ve never seen flame eat something so fast. I’ve no idea how it started. But the wind blew everything toward the shoreline, and it spread down the pier.”

Barrett grunted, a deep animal growl.

“The quay was full of crates and cargo. The flames bounced across that and hit the coal bunkers.”

Barrett exhaled, covering his face with one hand as he shook his head.

"It was over from there. The warehouses, customs offices, shipping offices, even the dry dock. Everything."

"You'd think a place built on water and covered in snow would be too wet to burn." Edward shivered, squeezing his eyes shut as though to block out the images he'd witnessed.

"How many were harmed?" Jasmine asked, afraid to hear the answer. "Surely they can rebuild. Ivran is wealthy."

"It started during the night." Edward did not look up to meet Jasmine's gaze. "So the place was mostly empty. The night guard made it out. During the day we might have caught the flames sooner and done something about it. But the injuries would surely have been worse."

"It's not the manpower that Bannack cares about," Barrett said.

"The constables should be here any moment," Edward responded glumly.

Poppy threw her arms around Edward as though she could keep him there using her body weight alone.

"That is completely ridiculous," Jasmine said. The warmth of the fire was suffocating her, and she fanned her face. "You did not do this! You cannot be instantly responsible for an accident!"

"Port Virmur is under my supervision," Edward replied, his voice listless. "It is my signature on every customs paper, my duty to vouch for everything that goes in and out of our facilities."

"Let me talk to my father," Jasmine suggested. "His men can examine the site, officially confirm that this was merely an accident."

Edward slowly shook his head, making the smallest of movements while his shoulders seemed to sink further.

Barrett crossed his arms but said nothing, looking less than impressed.

Even Poppy looked away.

Jasmine stood tall, feeling like she was speaking to a group of children. "Fine then, sit here and do nothing about it!" She grabbed her cloak from the wall.

"Wait," Barrett growled, grabbing her upper arm.

She shook him off but stopped to give him a moment to speak.

"Sometimes," Barrett said slowly, his voice sounding as though he were dragging it over gravel. "Working for Bannack industries . . . comes with a price."

"What does that even mean?" Jasmine yelled. She looked at Poppy, demanding an explanation.

Poppy released a shaky breath. "Sometimes Edward signs the papers. Even if he does not know what is in the crates."

Realization began to dawn on Jasmine. "You cannot be serious—he could be arrested for that. And . . . worse."

"It is imperative that we keep the constables out of an investigation," Barrett said.

"It is better to take the hit now," Edward said.

Poppy dropped her face to her hands, sobbing.

Jasmine threw the cloak around her shoulders. "Absolutely not." She picked up her gloves, forcing her fingers into them as quickly as possible. "I will not sit here and let this happen."

"Please Jasmine," Poppy sobbed. "There is nothing you can do. Do not make this worse."

Jasmine threw open the door, stepped between the two surprised bully-backs and set off into the snowy street. It was several hours after dark, but the night was still young.

CHAPTER 6

A hand caught Jasmine's wrist, tugging her around.
She dug her heels into the snow to avoid a stumble.

"Miss Caradoc," a low, deep voice rumbled above her. "I cannot let you go to your father with this information. It will only make Edward's situation worse."

Jasmine tried to shake her hand free, but Barrett did not let go.

"I understand that." Her breath steamed in the cold night air. "And I would not be so foolish, even though I am appalled that Edward has been a part of this." She tried to wrench her hand free again.

This time Barrett let her go. "You are not in a position to judge what a working man must be willing to do."

"I am not judging him." Jasmine kept her voice low, though she wanted to yell. "I am putting a stop to this." She turned and continued to stomp through the snow.

"What do you intend to do?" Barrett asked, falling into step beside her. He towered over her, fur coat and all, like a scolding bear ready to keep its cub in line.

"I'm going to speak to Ivran and put an end to all this."

The bear of a man stepped in her path. "No."

Jasmine swerved around him.

A large paw shot out, holding her back. "That is even more foolish than going to your father."

"Let. Me. Go," Jasmine hissed.

Barrett dropped his arm so that he was no longer making physical contact with her, but he continued to tower over her. "Edward is my only brother," he said. "I cannot let you risk his safety."

"You have no power over me," Jasmine shot up at him. She took a step forward to prove her point, glaring up at his face. "And I should like to think that speaking to my betrothed would save your brother's life, not risk it."

Barrett took a step back. "Mr. Bannack is your betrothed?" he asked, surprised.

Jasmine paused and then turned away, continuing to walk.

Barrett followed her, keeping her within arm's reach.

"Yes, Ivran is my betrothed," Jasmine said quietly. "Or, at least he will be, by the end of the night."

"That man is dangerous." Barrett's voice also dropped to a low mutter, but one he clearly intended for her to hear. "And if you can even find him at this hour, he's not going to be in a mood to negotiate."

"You make him sound like some sort of animal," Jasmine replied. "He is a gentleman, and your brother's life is in danger!" Her voice simmered with anger. "What do you expect me to do—sit back and let my sister lose her happiness? Or fearfully do nothing, like you?"

"No!" Barrett shot back. His voice was still quiet, but the anger in it was quite evident. "I'm making a plan. I'll think of something. But I can assure you, Ivran Bannack is no gentleman."

"Excellent. Wonderful." Jasmine squeezed her hands tightly and swung them as she walked. "While you are attempting to think of a plan, I am going to go to the Christmas Eve Ball and be absolutely mesmerizing to ensure this proposal happens as quickly as possible. And then once Ivran Bannack is promised into my family, he can never hurt Edward because Edward will be family as well." She glared over her shoulder at Barrett. "Let me know if you think of anything by tomorrow morning. Although everything should all be sorted by then."

She was still several blocks to her house, but she hadn't even noticed the biting cold. Barrett followed along silently.

"You are going to the Christmas Eve Ball?" he asked eventually.

Jasmine nodded, not feeling compelled to waste breath on more of an answer.

"I'm going with you."

Jasmine stopped at that, turning around to look at the windblown sailor behind her. She could not see much of him in the dark, but she could not imagine getting this rough-hewn man into a ballroom.

"It is taking place at the new Bannack Hall this year, right?" Barrett stated more than asked.

Jasmine nodded again.

"We need more information," he continued. "You are not going into the lion's den alone. Especially not as the lamb."

"I am not the lamb." Jasmine rolled her eyes as she turned back to the street.

"Marry whomever you want," Barrett said, still following her. "But can you get me into Bannack Hall tonight?"

"Well, I could. But it would not be easy," Jasmine said. "Besides, why should I?"

"Because you love your sister," Barrett answered. "I thought we had already established that."

"But how will getting you into Bannack Hall help Poppy?" Jasmine asked, not dissuaded by his flippant tone.

"Mr. Bannack moved his private office from Port Punta to Bannack Hall as soon as the hall was finished," Barrett explained. "I would not want to lead the constables any closer to Edward, but if I could uncover any information on Bannack himself . . . that would be something we could bring to your father."

Jasmine slowed her pace, letting her mind pick up the speed. "You are saying we could implicate Ivran in his own scheme rather than let Edward take the fall for it?"

"Precisely."

They were back at Caradoc house now. Jasmine walked past the front door and led Barrett around to the back.

"Ah, the old kitchen door," he said. His voice sounded softer, almost as though he were smiling.

Her mouth softened a bit, not that he could see it in the dark. This was the way they had snuck in all those years ago. "Once again, we are trying to avoid attention," she replied.

She gripped the door handle, holding it high as she lifted and eased the door open to avoid the worst of the squeaking hinges. After peeking inside first to ensure the room was empty, she walked through the doorway, once again inviting a stranger-turned-friend inside her home.

“Should I wait out here?” Barrett asked, hesitating before he stepped inside.

“How do you think I am going to get you into Bannack Hall looking like that?” Jasmine answered his question with one of her own.

He grinned and stepped forward. “So you will get me in?”

Jasmine waved him inside. The kitchen was pleasantly warm, dimly lit by a pile of coals banked below the cast-iron oven.

She plopped unceremoniously down on a bench by the door and yanked off her boots. “You really think you could discover whether Ivran is engaging in illegal activity?” She wriggled her stockinged toes in the heat as she pinched the gloves from her hands and removed her cloak.

“He is engaging in illegal activity.” Barrett had followed her lead, sitting beside her on the bench and removing his boots. “I just need the evidence to prove it.” He stood and shrugged out of his coat.

For some reason, Jasmine had expected that he would look less like a mountain and more like a man when he removed the thick fur from his shoulders. But that was not the case. Somehow, in the absence of any additional bulk, his back and shoulders appeared even broader still.

“Let me hide these just in case someone visits the kitchen for a late-night snack.” Jasmine busied herself with arranging his boots and coat under the bench, then tossed her own cloak on top of them. She stood back up and faced Barrett. “And uncovering Ivran will protect Edward and Poppy?”

“Working for Bannack Shipping comes with . . . certain responsibilities.” Barrett’s shoulders drooped, as though he felt the weight of those responsibilities at this very moment. “As long as Bannack has power over Edward, he and Poppy are at the whims of a . . . dangerous man.”

Jasmine crossed her arms. She could see his face again, at least better than she had been able to outside. She noticed, now, the similarity between the two brothers. On her own, she would never have realized that the boy Barrett from all those years ago resembled the grown Edward that her sister had fallen in love with. But she could see it now—the same nose, the shape of the forehead, the dimple when they smiled. Perhaps that was why it had been so easy to trust and love Edward. He had already felt familiar.

And it felt all too easy to trust Barrett now. His plan seemed dangerous and difficult, but if it succeeded, Jasmine could free both Poppy and Edward, as well as easily extricate herself from a further relationship with Ivran.

She nodded. “You try your plan, but we will keep my plan as backup if anything goes awry.”

“Your plan, as in the plan to marry Bannack?” he asked.

She nodded again.

“That is an odd contingency.” He stared back at her as if seeing her for the first time since that Christmas Eve. His eyes scanned her face. “Are you doing this for yourself or for your sister?”

Jasmine held back a joyless laugh, but it came out as more of a stifled snort. She did not want to think about the answer to that question. “Let us get ready for a ball,” she said, pushing those thoughts away.

They snuck through the house, an easy feat as the servants were out celebrating Christmas Eve with their own families. No Miss Briar had stayed awake to keep an

eye on the children this time.

As they moved through the hallway, though, Jasmine heard a door creak open behind her. She whipped around, afraid they had been caught.

But it was only Barrett. He had stopped at the nursery door, opened it without invitation, and was peering inside.

Jasmine fell back a few steps, ducking under his arm to peer into the room with him. It did not escape her notice that he'd remembered which door belonged to the nursery.

"I wanted to come back," he whispered. His voice rumbled over her and around her, surrounding her in its quiet hum. "I really did. But I've been at sea since that night. Quite literally. I found work as a cabin boy on one of Bannack's ships that Christmas morning. The next time I set foot on shore was nearly two years later. I had moved on to become an apprentice seaman at that point, but I did not think that an apprentice seaman would be welcome to come knocking on your front door."

Jasmine twisted back, looking up at him as she stepped away from the nursery door.

He dropped his face toward her. "I thought you would have forgotten me by then."

"I had not," Jasmine said. She wanted to tell him that she had thought of him nearly every day for years afterward. That she had replayed that magical night countless times in her head. That she had waited for him under the stars on the hill above the cemetery. Well, she had accidentally already spilled that part back at the cottage. But hopefully he had not noticed. Those were the hopes and dreams of a much younger girl. She truly did not know this man in front of her, and it felt wrong to burden him with her imaginative expectations.

She turned, leading the way down the hall once again before he could respond. After a moment, though, she could sense that he was not following her. She turned back toward him.

Barrett still stood by the closed door of the nursery, but he hunched slightly forward, pressing two fingers into his forehead as though in pain.

Jasmine quickly retraced her steps. "Is something wrong?"

"No," Barrett whispered through clenched teeth. "I've just been getting some head pains this evening. It will pass in a moment."

Jasmine waited next to him, unsure if she should leave him to suffer in peace or awkwardly offer the comfort of her presence. "I have some willow bark lozenges in my room . . ." she offered.

He stood up straight and stretched his shoulders. "I think it is over, but thank you."

Jasmine nodded in the dark and continued to lead the way down the hall. Once in her room, she opened the bottom drawer of her vanity and pulled out the linen bag of willow bark lozenges. "Here," she said, handing him the bag. "Just in case the pains return."

He took the bag from her hand, the wax paper wrappings crinkling inside the linen. "Thank you."

"You can rest for a moment," Jasmine said. "I will ready myself for the evening and then we will ready . . . you." She gestured to all of him.

He smiled at that, and she disappeared into her large closet to find a suitable gown. Glad that she had already bathed that morning, she was able to brush her hair into a simple coif and powder her cheeks.

Several minutes later, when Jasmine was satisfied with her appearance, she took a full appraisal of Barrett. "My father has nothing that will even come close to

fitting you,” she said. “Our best option is to brush out your fur coat, and you can borrow one of his hats. That should get you into the ball at least. Probably best to blend in as a footman once we arrive though.”

Jasmine walked around him again. “We still need to do something with that hair. Here, sit.” She pointed to the chair in front of her vanity.

Following her cue, Barrett sat on the chair in front of her, awkwardly holding his hands over his knees.

“Have you figured out your plan yet?” Jasmine asked, reaching over him for her hairbrush.

“Somewhat,” Barrett replied, sitting up straighter.

His hair was wet and tangled from their time in the street, but it was healthy and clean. She gently worked the brush through the ends.

“Bannack had a private office down at Port Punta. He kept it heavily guarded, which made sense as it likely contained the safe and all important business paperwork. But he was surprisingly secretive about who he let into it.”

Jasmine continued to work Barrett’s hair. The brushing brought out a lovely sheen that practically glowed in the candlelight, and she was jealous of his thick curls.

“He moved that office to an even more secure location inside Bannack Hall,” Barrett continued. “I need to get inside it, and I think you can help me.”

Jasmine looked up, raising her eyebrows at him in the mirror. “So your very dangerous plan does involve me?”

“Not for the dangerous part.” He looked back at her through the mirror. “You do not have to set foot anywhere near the office. I just need you to nick his keys.”

“Excuse me?” Jasmine dropped the hairbrush.

“It will be easy,” Barrett said.

“No.” Jasmine bent down to retrieve the brush.

“Picture this,” Barrett said, undeterred. “You are stepping off the dance floor after a lovely dance, and you sway, slightly dizzy from the dancing. You lean into him briefly for support, grabbing his jacket so you do not fall. He grabs your waist to steady you, and you mumble your thanks. You right yourself, and he has no idea that his keys have transferred from his pocket to yours. What could go wrong?”

“That is a bad plan,” Jasmine affirmed, putting the brush back in its place. The worst that could happen was that she would look clumsy. And he was right, it would neither endanger her nor risk her back up plan. “But I will participate in it.”

CHAPTER 7

The Caradoc carriage was already in use, so Jasmine and Barrett set out from Caradoc house on foot. Jasmine now wore her biggest wool cloak to protect the fine dress she'd put on. She also trudged through the snow in her boots, stashing her smallest pair of dancing slippers inside the reticule on her wrist. It was a little bulky, but she would have to get everything sorted in the coatroom before they entered the ball itself.

Walking beside her, Barrett looked slightly more refined with his coat brushed out, his hair tied back, and his head adorned with one of her father's silk-covered top hats.

The streets were busy but still dark, as the lamp lighting ceremony had not yet taken place. But as they neared Bannack Hall, that changed.

The hall itself was aglow from the inside out. A bubble of light poured from the glass rooftop, illuminating the light falling of snow.

Laughter and chatter carried clearly throughout the square. Outside the hall, crowds of townsfolk, carriage drivers, and footmen huddled around several large bonfires. While the air was frigid in temperature, it carried the warm scents of mulled wine and roasting pork.

As they ascended the hall's steps, Jasmine slipped off the hood of her cloak. She did not have the invitation for entry since her parents had taken it. But hopefully, her face was recognizable enough.

And hopefully her name held enough clout that they would not question her companion.

She smiled warmly to the uniformed guards at the entrance to the hall. She walked past them, hoping to avoid any sort of communication at all, but one of the guards stepped into her path before she could open the front door.

"Miss Jasmine Caradoc," she said brightly. "I believe my parents are already here?"

The guard disappeared inside the hall but returned quickly, holding the door open for her. "Welcome, Miss Caradoc and—"

"He is with me," Jasmine said to cut him off, sailing through the doorway and pulling Barrett along right behind her. "Thank you." She continued to smile as she confidently strode toward the coatroom.

"It would not be easy?" Barrett whispered over her ear.

"Do not let it go to your head," Jasmine admonished. "It is because you were with me, not because you cleaned up well."

Two attendants stepped forward to assist them in the coatroom, but Barrett dismissed them with a wave of his hand. Stepping behind Jasmine, he helped her remove her cloak.

As he fastidiously hung it with the other coats in the room, Jasmine reached down to undo her boots. But her skirts, pushed out at the hips, swarmed around her ankles, and she struggled to get through the volume in order to reach her own feet.

"Allow me." Barrett was suddenly kneeling in front of her.

"Oh, thank you." Jasmine lifted her head as she stood, knocking it into Barrett's chin.

He grunted in pain.

"I am so sorry," she whispered, not wanting to draw the attention of the attendants. "Did I hurt you?"

"Justh bit mah tongue," he mumbled. He squeezed his shoulders up and shivered, absorbing the pain. "I'll be alrighth."

"Sorry," Jasmine repeated, feeling horrible. She rubbed the back of her head. It did not really hurt, but it was still tingling from the burst of contact.

"There." Barrett reached toward her feet. "Let us try this again."

Jasmine scooped up as much fabric as she could in her arms and pushed her right foot forward.

Barrett untied the laces and, with a few quick tugs, he pulled the boot down her ankle and simultaneously threw her off balance.

Jasmine dropped the skirts and grabbed his shoulder with one hand to steady herself. Her awkward nerves poured out into a hushed giggle.

Barrett smiled up at her, his single dimple digging deep into his cheek behind the length of his facial hair.

Unfortunately, that only made her giggle more.

Barrett successfully pulled the boot free and slid it out from beneath her cascading skirts. "I would say we are doing just fine," he said.

Keeping a hand on his shoulder, Jasmine used her other hand to rearrange her skirts and produce her other foot. "Let us just hope the rest of the evening goes a little more smoothly."

"Consider this our practice round, then." Barrett removed her other boot without hassle.

Jasmine handed him her dancing slippers. They were a lovely sky-blue silk on top of a short heel. She hoped her woolen socks did not smell too badly as Barrett slipped them on her feet.

"Thank you," Jasmine said, straightening up and removing her hand from his shoulder. Her entire body sparked with nerves, and she shook out her hands.

"You may not always see me, but I will not take my eyes off you," Barrett reassured as he stood. He had already removed his own fur coat and set about rolling up the sleeves of his shirt.

Jasmine nodded at him. "I am ready."

He gestured toward the door, stepping back so she could lead the way.

Just as it had been during the world fair, the antechamber to the main hall was mostly dark.

Jasmine paused for a moment, enjoying the rush of delight that swept through her. The fake stars on the ceiling above buzzed with magic, casting a soft glow on Barrett's upturned face.

"Incredible," he breathed.

"Almost as beautiful as the real thing," Jasmine said. It felt strangely intimate, to see something as expansive as a starlit sky while knowing that she was alone

with a man in a small, dark room. She noticed her heart pounding fast and loud in her chest. And her stomach squeezed pleasantly in a way she had never experienced.

“There is no Persephone’s Veil, though,” Barrett said, dropping his face to smile at her.

“The Veil is only visible from Earth once every eight hundred years, so that makes sense,” Jasmine said with a smirk.

“You should see the stars at sea on a clear night,” Barrett said, suddenly looking into the distance. “When there is no land in sight, and no lanterns or light of any sort to muddle your view. Especially if the sea is calm, the brighter stars will reflect off the water. You would love it.”

Jasmine breathed in a shallow breath, exhaling it quickly. “That sounds beautiful,” she whispered.

Someone opened the door to the main hall, letting light stream into the antechamber and waking Jasmine from the moment. She blinked at the sudden brightness and stepped into the Christmas Eve Ball.

As breathtaking as the room of stars had been, Jasmine nearly lost her breath at the splendor of the party taking place in front of her. The great hall she had seen just three days prior had been stunningly transformed. Elaborate candelabras, large lanterns, and even more magical stars lit the large space. The light reflected off the dark glass panes of the ceiling, creating a massive overhead mirror. Standing just at the opening of the hall, Jasmine could look up and catch a glimpse of the entirety of the room reflected back at her. Two hundred people, dressed in their Christmas finery, swirled around the room. Most of the guests wore various shades of red, green, and black, creating a jewel-like kaleidoscope of color.

The hall itself had been decorated to represent a snowy forest. Once again, Jasmine felt as though she were out of doors, even though she was clearly inside. Tall coniferous trees had been brought into the space, their tips nearly reaching the mirrored ceiling. Sparkling fake snow—made from some mixture of fiber and paste—floated weightlessly on the tree branches and sprinkled over the tables of food. It even piled against certain points on the wall and in corners to look like a snowbank.

The sharp scent of pine and the warm aroma of various spiced desserts gently disguised the odor of sweating dancers. The plethora of candles added a cozy touch of smoke to the air, along with the warmth of melting wax.

The marchioness usually hosted the ball at her castle, and it was always lovely. But this was beyond magical.

The guests were already engrossed in the evening, and no one noticed Jasmine’s late entrance into the crowded room.

“Good luck,” Barrett whispered into her ear as he lightly nudged her upper arm. They had decided it would be best for him to attempt to blend in with the servers since they could not find him appropriate formal wear from her smaller-sized father’s closet. He stepped away from her side, blending into the side wall.

Jasmine felt a rush of cold air behind her at his absence. Somewhere in the evening, they had fallen back into an easy camaraderie, discussing their plan and then taking action.

As Barrett stepped away, Jasmine realized she had so many more things to say, so many more questions to ask. She wanted to know more about him, who he had become, if he had thought back to that night as frequently and fondly as she had.

But now was not the time. She made her way into the thick crowd of people, smiling and nodding as friends and acquaintances called out her name. She did her best not to make eye contact so that she would not be stopped by anyone.

There was only one person she wanted to talk to tonight.

She smiled as her eyes sought out Barrett. He moved quietly along the windowed wall, matching her pace step for step. At least his ridiculous height made him easy for her to see over the crowd, even if he was hunching forward as much as possible to avoid attention.

She brought her eyes back to the task at hand. There was only one person she *needed* to talk to tonight.

Ivran stood at the head of the room, where a special table had been set up for the marchioness and her husband. It was the area of the room where the most respected members of society tended to congregate. In the past, Jasmine had tended to avoid this crowd, not that she would have been out of place. Rather, it always felt like the least Christmas-y part of the room. She was much happier on the dance floor or wandering through the incredible sculptures and decorations that the marchioness created every year.

Today, though, she sauntered confidently around the dancing couples and walked straight toward the hostess's table. Ivran stood near the seated marchioness, making her laugh, as though the two of them were hosting this event together.

"Your Ladyship." Jasmine curtsied when she reached her goal. "Mr. Bannack." She smiled and dipped her head. "The ball has never looked more magical. Together, you have truly created a masterpiece."

Ivran's eyes lit up, though Jasmine was not sure if it was her presence or her praise that caused such a reaction. He bowed in response. "My lovely Miss Caradoc," he said. "What a perfect Christmas surprise. Your mother informed me that you were unwell?" He held out his hand.

"It was merely a headache." Jasmine placed her hand in his, allowing him to tuck her arm into his, claiming her as his partner for the evening. "But it has quite passed."

"I am delighted to hear it," he responded.

Standing once again in Ivran's presence with the knowledge she now had of him, Jasmine wondered if she should—or would—feel differently. She let the conversation resume and flow around her. She felt as though she were one of the mirrored windows above, looking down on everyone below. She openly studied Ivran, trying to see him from a different angle.

Her first thought was that he looked very much the same. His height matched hers, his beard had been trimmed to a more typical length, and his eyes were bright, watchful. He did not *feel* any more dangerous.

He definitely did not look like a man who, only hours ago, had lost a major portion of his business assets in a fire.

Ivran caught her eye. "Jasmine, would you do me the honor of a dance?"

Now was her chance. "It would be a pleasure." She smiled back at him.

As he spun her around the floor, Jasmine felt her heart race. And not just from the physical movement. This would be the perfect moment to steal Ivran's key, and she needed to be ready.

She searched his waistcoat as they danced, looking for the pocket placement. Ivran lifted her arm, spinning her out.

She felt herself growing dizzy and frantically searched the room for something to anchor her eyes. There. Barrett. Standing tall and unobtrusive against the wall.

Through the final beats of the song, she kept her eyes on him and breathed steadily.

The keys were likely in the right-side pocket of Ivran's waistcoat.

They finished the dance. Ivran bowed low over Jasmine's hand, as was customary. But he pressed her hand to his mouth and remained there for moments longer than was typical.

Jasmine squeezed her stomach muscles, scanning the room for Barrett once again. He gave her a small nod, and she turned her eyes back to Ivran before he straightened.

He held her hand, guiding her from the dance floor.

Jasmine launched her upper body forward in a halfhearted attempt to stumble.

She instinctively caught herself. It seemed that tripping over one's toes was more difficult when it was not accidental.

Ivran tightened his grip on her hand. "Are you alright?" His eyes narrowed.

She used her other hand to brush her forehead. "Oh, yes. Just a little lightheaded is all." Somehow, having her hand near her head made her feel safer.

She glanced once more at the side pocket of Ivran's waistcoat and launched herself into him. "Oh!" She let out a breathy wail as she fell.

This was the most fun she had ever had in her life. And she definitely did not want to tell Barrett that.

As predicted, Ivran caught her in his arms. "Miss Caradoc!"

She awkwardly clung to him, her body hinged at the waist. "I am so sorry!" she cried. She grabbed his coat to steady herself, her fingers dipping into the pocket.

She was good at this.

She readjusted her weight over her feet as Ivran steadied her waist.

Her fingers swiped through the pocket.

Empty.

When she stood on her own two feet, running her hands through her hair, she did not have to fake the blush that spread over her cheeks.

CHAPTER 8

“Miss Caradoc,” Ivran said, tucking her hand into his arm once again. “Have you viewed the ice sculptures yet? I believe you would love them.”

“I have not,” Jasmine replied. “And I should very much like to view them.” That much at least was genuine.

“We worked with a brilliant sculptor,” Ivran explained as he guided her through the main hall. “He barely finished this exhibit in time for tonight, and I cannot wait to show it to you.”

Barrett followed along with them, skulking against the wall behind the crowds. However, as they neared the end of the main hall, the building split into smaller wings, and the crowd thinned.

Jasmine worried that Barrett would be exposed. According to Barrett, he had been working for Ivran long enough that the man would know him on sight.

As they rounded a corner down the hall, Jasmine saw Barrett stop and lean against the wall, putting more distance between them so that his trailing them would be less obvious. Jasmine resigned herself to losing sight of him, as she did not want to look over her shoulder too often. She wanted to trust that he was close.

Although, thinking about it, she was not sure why she wanted him close. She did not feel entirely unsafe with Ivran. Perhaps she should, since Barrett, Edward, and Poppy had told her he was a dangerous man. She did not feel particularly safe with him either.

But she was not in immediate danger, even if she was alone with him. They were still in the midst of a busy event.

Ivran stopped them outside the open double door to a smaller exhibit hall. Two uniformed footmen flanked the door. Jasmine noticed Ivran nod conspicuously to the one on the right as they passed through the doorway.

Jasmine looked back as the footmen closed the doors behind them. Barrett would be unable to follow them now. Not that she needed him to follow her. But her anxiety increased the second the doors clicked shut.

Ivran must have noticed the fear in her eyes. He patted her hand and smiled. “I thought you deserved a private exhibition of the artwork here tonight.” He leaned in conspiratorially, even though they were the only ones in the spacious room. “And there is a special piece I am excited to show you.”

Jasmine stopped breathing.

He was going to propose.

She had just arrived, and he was already going to propose. She had not even gotten a chance to see the inside of his office, or steal the key from his pocket, or ask him the targeted questions she and Barrett had prepared to glean information from him.

They had not gotten to try Barrett's plan, and now she would have to follow through with her original plan. Her original plan that she desperately wanted to avoid. Her original plan that she now realized she had been far too happy to relinquish to Barrett's more dangerous plan because no part of her wanted to marry this man.

She would do it to save Poppy, of course. But only if there were no other option.

But now she didn't know if there was another option, because they had not yet gotten any information with which to start looking for actual information to take down Bannack.

Jasmine's mind barely registered the beautiful ice statues that adorned several pillars throughout the room. She felt herself smile and heard herself make appropriate sounds of awe when Ivran paused between his wordy explanations.

The room was cold. Keeping her arm looped through Ivran's, she brought her hands together to warm them.

She could accept Ivran's proposal and then implicate him in his crimes. She could easily break the engagement if he was a criminal. But that would require trusting Barrett to find evidence enough to bring to the investigators—her father, really—and if Bannack had been successfully importing illegal items for this long without being caught, he had probably covered his tracks well enough not to be taken down in one evening.

The sculpture in front of her depicted two doves nestled closely together. A small pool of water was forming on the granite pillar at their base.

She could turn down Ivran's proposal, say she needed time to think about it. But that felt risky, especially if he pressured her. And seeing as the fire would likely bring some form of constabulary investigation, she presumed that Ivran would want to solidify himself in her father's good graces as quickly as possible.

Jasmine looked back at the sculptures they had already viewed: the doves, a heart-shaped mirror, two swans with intertwined necks, two larger-than-life hands joined together . . .

"And now, Jasmine." Ivran dropped her hand and stepped in front of her. "I have one final masterpiece to unveil to you." He gestured up at the last sculpture.

It was twice as large as any other statue in the room, roughly the size of Jasmine herself. And it stood atop a low base on the floor, unlike the rest of the statues, which had been raised to eye level.

Jasmine found herself looking directly into the carved-ice eyes of a young bride. A bride who looked remarkably like Jasmine. Shocked, she took in the rest of the statue.

It was beautifully done, she had to admit. And it could have been mistaken for any beautiful young woman, except for the very obvious bouquet of jasmine flowers in the bride's hand.

She did not know whether to laugh or be nauseous.

She hardly knew this man, and yet he had commissioned a life-sized portrait of her as a bride. Suddenly, her unrealistic daydreams about her young friend Barrett felt much less suffocating. Her dreams of him had been *about him*. Not about what he could be for her.

Ivran reached into his pocket, pulling out a small velvet-covered box.

No.

Perhaps, a different girl would have appreciated the attempted romantic gesture. Or, perhaps, she would have accepted it from a different man. The way the statue held the bouquet of jasmine flowers... Jasmine bloomed on a hedge, the blossoms did not have stems and could not be made into a traditional bouquet like the statue was holding. It was a ridiculously minor detail, but one that made Jasmine's stomach turn.

No. No. No.

"My dearest Jasmine," Ivran said. Jasmine was not sure which set of eyes were more soulless at the moment—Ivran's or the ice sculpture's.

The door banged open.

Jasmine and Ivran both spun toward the door.

Barrett hastily entered the room.

Jasmine breathed for the first time in minutes, feeling a wave of relief warm her entire body.

"Have you utterly taken leave of your senses?" Ivran bellowed.

Jasmine stepped back, completely blindsided by his angry outburst.

Rather than face him, the footmen stepped out of sight behind the door.

"Sorry sir," Barrett said, stopping in front of them. "It's from Virmur."

Cold dread washed over Jasmine, freezing her back in place. Barrett needed to leave. What was he doing walking straight up to Bannack like this?

Barrett bowed his head forward, holding out a silver platter that contained a single envelope. He presented the platter to Bannack without lifting his face.

Ivran grabbed the letter from the plate and tore it open. His eyes narrowed as he read it, and anger contorted his face.

Barrett sidled behind him as he read, better hiding himself from Ivran and putting himself in a position to see Jasmine more clearly.

Ivran looked up from the letter. He smiled at Jasmine, but she could still see the anger fuming in his eyes. "Please excuse me for a moment," he said. "Responsibility calls."

"On Christmas Eve?" Jasmine hoped that her relief did not show.

"The world continues to spin." Ivran bowed slightly to her, then strode toward the door.

Jasmine waited for a quick second to mouth "thank you" to Barrett. Then she picked up her skirts so she could run after Ivran.

"Surely the night does not have to be all business," she said as she caught up, gripping his arm. Her intent was entirely the opposite from her words because this was the perfect chance to get into his office.

He slid his hand under hers, separating it from his arm and bowing over it, expertly extricating himself from her grasp. "I will be but a moment, my lady."

Jasmine grabbed his hand in both of hers before he could let go. "And I will remain by your side tonight, just as I shall in the future, until we can finish the conversation we had just started." She tucked her hand back into his arm, pulling them into a walk. "Do not worry, I shall not be a distraction."

CHAPTER 9

Ivran's office was spacious, meticulously filled with bookcases, filing boxes, and stacks of leather-bound ledgers.

Jasmine made a show of looking around the room, but she watched Ivran carefully to see which pocket he put his keyring back into. Not that she had the gumption to try the fainting trick again.

"Please, sit down," Ivran said, touching the back of a comfortable-looking chair. "I will only be a moment."

"Thank you," Jasmine replied. "But I would much rather take a look at your library." She stepped over the bookcases. "You can learn a lot about a man by the books he keeps."

"Hah. Do not judge me too harshly on this selection, then, as it is only my office." Ivran sat behind his desk and pulled out a paper and pen.

Jasmine ran her finger along a row of books. *Business Principles. Atlas of Local Ports. Modern Navigation. Import and Export Law.* It was a rather boring list of titles.

She stepped to the next shelf. This one appeared to be storage for ledgers and files more than books. She casually pulled a bound stack of papers off the shelf.

"There's nothing in that one except for numbers and dates," Ivran said, a slight edge to his voice. "Please, come sit down."

Jasmine closed the makeshift book, but she did not return it to the shelf. Tucking it under her arm, she did as Ivran wished and sat in the chair opposite him. She wanted to open the book and look through the numbers and dates he did not want her to see. Would he actively stop her?

He still eyed her warily.

She slipped the book onto the desk in front of her. "Do not mind me." She smiled. "I am not even here. Surely your business is urgent."

Ivran bent back over the letter. A large iron safe was tucked against the wall behind him. Jasmine eyed it, wondering how hard it would be to pick a lock.

Not that she could do anything with Ivran nervously watching her every move. Maybe it was a bad idea for her to be here. She did not even know what kind of information Barrett was looking for. He should have been the one in this room.

But he was not. And she was here.

She needed to get Ivran out of the room for a moment. At the very least, there was information in the book she'd set on his desk that he did not want her to see.

She could feign a headache.

Her stomach twisted. She had already pretended to faint. It felt risky to try the same ruse twice.

Ivran turned to the safe behind him.

Jasmine watched him, keeping her eyelids droopy so she did not appear alert.

It did not matter, as Ivran covered the lock with his spare hand while he twisted in the code.

He swung open the safe's door just far enough to reach inside, but that was far enough for Jasmine to get a brief glimpse of the contents.

Stacks of paper, leather coin bags, and several bottles of ginever. That was odd. It must be a very expensive ginever to keep it in his safe. It looked the same as the bottles that adorned that bar cart in the corner, but Jasmine was not familiar enough with the product to discern the differences between bottles.

Ivran pulled a few letters from the safe and closed it behind him.

Jasmine longed to lean over the desk and read what he was reading. She was terribly bored just waiting, and her body was exhausted from staying so tense.

"Ivran," she asked tentatively after another few minutes of his furious writing. "I am quite parched. Would you fetch me a drink? I promise I shall not speak another word until you are finished."

Ivran looked up at her. For a brief moment, she saw annoyance on his face. He immediately relaxed his expression. He nodded once and turned around, opening the safe once again. He removed a bottle of ginever.

Jasmine started to shake her head. She wanted him to leave the room to get her a drink himself.

"I have a selection here of the very finest of Bannack Shipping's stock. Allow me to treat you to the best." He turned back around, displaying the small bottle as he worked his thumb over the cork stopper.

Jasmine continued to shake her head, adding in a smile. "Oh, no thank you," she said.

Ivran looked disappointed. Genuinely disappointed. "Please try just a little," he begged. "It is the best I have to offer."

Jasmine touched her head. "So soon after the dreadful headache I had earlier this evening, though? I do not think that is wise."

"I can assure you, my premium stock is so smooth that you could consume an entire bottle of it and not even feel a pang in your head or stomach."

"I do not doubt it," Jasmine assured him, very much thinking the opposite. "Another night, perhaps." She still needed him to leave the room. "Just a warm cider for now?"

Ivran nodded, setting the bottle on the side of his desk as the safe was already closed behind him.

He rounded the desk and moved past her chair.

Jasmine watched him reach for the door handle, waiting for the moment when she would be alone.

Ivran opened the door behind her, stuck his head out and . . . "Could you fetch a warm cider for Miss Caradoc?" he asked one of the two footmen standing guard outside the door.

Jasmine sank a little deeper into the very comfortable chair she was sitting on. She had no skill for subterfuge.

Barrett's plan was not going to work. If she wanted to save Poppy and Edward, there was only one way forward.

She sighed silently. Then she leaned forward and rested her hands on Ivran's desk in a very unladylike manner.

She studied his face as she had earlier that night, noting his features and hoping the look on her own face was one of attentive adoration. "Thank you, Ivran," she said. "You are so kind."

Ivran looked up to nod at her, noted her gaze, and then dropped his attention back to the letter he was writing. He shook his shoulders for a moment, as if distracted, but then returned to focus.

Jasmine kept her gaze steady, dropping her head onto her fist.

Ivran glanced back up at her a moment later.

She smiled, pretending she had never been more content.

"Miss Caradoc," Ivran finally said after attempting to write a few more words. "Your gaze is quite . . . intent."

"I am merely excited to resume the conversation we were having near the ice sculptures." Jasmine blinked a few times, dropping her gaze to the table in front of her. She tried to catch a glimpse of the words he was writing. His penmanship was beautifully crisp. She only caught a few words: "not Bannack Hall" and "less conspicuous there." She repeated the words to herself so she would not forget them.

Ivran smiled, an uncomfortable gesture that seemed to widen his white mustache and scrunch his nose.

"I am most pleased to hear that," he said, his eyes gleaming. He set his pen down. "In fact, we could continue that conversation right here."

Jasmine kept a smile on her face, though her stomach threatened to empty itself.

"Miss Jasmine," Ivran said, standing and adjusting his suit coat. "We have known each other for some time now." He stepped around the desk.

A quick rap on the door startled them both. Ivran snarled. "Not now!" he shouted.

But the door was already open, and an unusually tall footman entered the room. He held out a silver tray that contained a steaming ceramic mug. "For the lady." Barrett bowed.

Jasmine jumped up in surprise, quickly reaching for the hot cup. "Thank you," she said, a little too loudly. She glared at the door behind him, hoping he would understand her message. He needed to leave.

Ivran, standing so close to the man who had twice interrupted his proposal, looked up at Barrett's face as though noticing him for the first time. His eyes narrowed.

"I have only come to pick up your answer to the previous missive," Barrett said, his voice higher than usual.

"I am nearly finished." Ivran went back to his desk and sat down.

Jasmine glared at the door once again.

Barrett stood to his full height and winked at her.

Jasmine wanted to throw her hot cider at his face. She had never experienced such an intense flash of anger—well, not since she was a child at least. He needed to be out of this room. Immediately.

Turning around the room, Jasmine made her way back to the bookcases. She desperately wanted to get a look at one of the ledgers since they had made Ivran so nervous.

The papers were bound in different ways, and not all of them were clearly labeled. But from what she could tell, she had pulled the previous book from the section of shipping manifests, and they appeared to be shelved in order of date. She set the cup of cider down on the shelf to free her hands and gently tugged at the most current binding of manifests, an idea forming in her head.

Holding the book in one hand, she picked up the cider with her other hand and turned back toward the room. It would take her approximately three steps to get back to her chair.

She wanted to look at Barrett and return his wink, but Ivran had already glanced up, tracking her movement. If they all made it out of this alive, she would be remembered as the most clumsy girl Punta had ever seen.

She took a step toward the chair and tripped over her own feet. It was much smoother this time, now that she'd had practice.

The book slipped from her hand, and she launched the cup of cider on top of it as she fell to her knees, freeing her hands just in time to catch herself before a full fall.

Ivran jumped from his chair. "Miss Caradoc!" he cried. His voice sounded strangled, as though he were holding back the anger he so quickly unleashed on his subordinates.

"I am quite alright," Jasmine said. She bit back the natural urge to apologize.

Ivran stepped around the desk, but Barrett was already at her side, offering her a hand.

"Oh, no!" Jasmine ignored the helping hand and reached down to the floor in front of her.

The loosely bound papers had split apart, sliding across the floor in a puddle of sticky, warm cider.

"I am so sorry!" This, Jasmine could apologize for, even though she was inwardly filled with glee.

"What were you trying to do?" Ivran asked, his patience running thin. "I specifically told you not to read those ones."

Barrett was already on his knees, picking up the broken pieces of the ceramic cup.

Jasmine lifted a page from the floor, letting it drip for a moment. She gave it a vigorous shake to help the process, but only succeeded in flinging drops of cider even deeper into the room.

"No, no." Ivran leaned over, grabbing the paper from her hand. "Get up. Leave this to the servants."

Jasmine grabbed his wrist, pretending he had offered it to help her up. What a wonderful husband he would have made.

Ivran stumbled a bit as she used him to leverage herself off the floor.

"Perhaps you should call for some towels?" Jasmine suggested, trying once again to get Ivran to leave the room.

"No," he replied, setting the paper on his desk. He turned to her slowly. "I think it is best if I take you somewhere . . . else." He dropped his hand onto Jasmine's, firmly holding her in place as he led her from the room.

Jasmine threw one final glance over her shoulder in time to catch Barrett slip a handful of very soppy pages into the folds of his shirt.

She inhaled deeply and surreptitiously led Ivran out of his own office.

CHAPTER 10

“Let me find you a place to sit,” Ivran said. In the main hall, he led her directly to a table near the side of the room.

“I am afraid my headache from earlier never quite went away,” Jasmine replied. “I think it is time for me to go back home.”

“That . . .” Ivran paused, and his shoulders drooped. “That might be for the best,” he agreed.

Jasmine wanted to laugh at the disappointment in his voice. It sounded as though he had quite resigned himself to not proposing this evening. And she was more than relieved at that prospect.

“My darling!” Jasmine froze as her mother captured her other arm. “I’m so glad to see you are feeling better!” The cheerful word was accompanied by a quick pinch. “I knew it was only nerves,” her mother whispered into Jasmine’s ear. “What a wonderful surprise to see you.” This was accompanied by another soft pinch in the arm. “Mr. Bannack.” She smiled.

Ivran dipped his head. “Lady Caradoc, what excellent timing.”

Lady Caradoc’s eyebrows shot up in excitement. “Oh! Is there something you wish to tell me?” She twisted her head, making a show of looking at Jasmine’s hand.

“It seems your daughter is still feeling unwell,” Ivran said, ignoring Lady Caradoc’s forward attempts. “Could I leave her in your motherly care to get home safely?”

“Leave? No.” Lady Caradoc glanced quickly between the two of them.

Jasmine felt another pinch on her arm.

“It is surely just nerves. The two of you should spend more time together this evening. Perhaps somewhere quiet, where Jasmine can calm her nerves.”

“No,” Ivran said, a little too loudly and a little too hastily. “I would not want to risk her health,” he quickly followed with.

“He is right, Mother,” Jasmine said, pulling her hand away from Ivran’s arm. “Let us not keep him. Thank you, Mr. Bannack.” Jasmine released the poor man. “My apologies for keeping you from your business.”

Ivran’s face softened, his ego appeased. “I look forward to speaking with you soon, Miss Caradoc,” he said.

Jasmine smiled but refrained from using her words to agree.

“He has not proposed?” Mama whispered as soon as he was out of earshot. “Did something happen? Is something the matter? Are you truly ill?”

Jasmine leaned into her mother's side. "Come sit down and chat with me for a moment," she said.

Jasmine found two chairs that afforded her a clear view of the long hallway to Ivran's office so she could watch for Barrett. She was thankful her mother had come when she did. Hopefully they had given Barrett enough time in the office.

"I have discovered some things about Mr. Bannack this evening," Jasmine said. She still grasped her mother's hand.

"Oh?" Her mother looked genuinely intrigued. "What sorts of things?"

Jasmine leaned closer to her mother's ear. "He is quite prone to anger, Mama," she said in a low tone, just loud enough to carry in the small space between them.

"How so?" Lady Caradoc asked.

"And I think he is only interested in me because of Papa."

"That is ridiculous," Lady Caradoc said. "What benefit could the richest man in Punta attain from your Papa?"

"From the captain of constables?" Jasmine corrected, speaking her whole thought out loud.

"What are you implying?" her mother asked.

"Honestly, I do not entirely know," Jasmine replied.

A tall footman walked down the hallway, carrying a silver platter full of broken ceramic pieces.

"But I intend to find out." Jasmine stood.

Barrett had not seemed to notice her, which was not surprising as she was sitting in a crowd of people. But she had been watching him, and she had seen which side door he had left the building through.

Jasmine worked her way through the hall and stepped outside into a small garden. It was not much of a garden at the moment, unless one considered iced-over hedges and barren dirt plots a garden. She was glancing around for Barrett when a hand grabbed her elbow, sliding her onto a side pathway.

Jasmine yelped in surprise, her body reacting even though she knew exactly whom it was.

She slapped a hand over her mouth, wishing that she was slapping him instead. "Snatching a lady from a garden pathway is a great way to stay unnoticed," she hissed, "and so is walking into your employer's office!"

"I didn't want to say your name out loud just now," Barrett replied, pulling them further down the path. The low bass of his whisper made the hair on the back of her head stand on end. Or maybe that was just a shiver from the cold.

"So making me scream was the quieter option?"

"I'm sorry," Barrett said. "It will not happen again." He smirked. "Or maybe it will. I can't make any promises."

"And you keep waltzing up to Ivran. What are you going to do *when* he notices you?" Jasmine knew her tone was accusatory, but she hoped it conveyed the fear she had felt when Barrett had put himself in danger.

"This was my plan, remember?" he said. He pulled them to a stop in a darker corner of the hedgerows. "You said you would not take any risk for it, and look how that is turning out?"

"Thank you," Jasmine said, a little softer. Despite the cold, her stomach felt calm, and her heart had slowed to a comfortable pace. She did feel better when Barrett was near. "I felt less endangered when you showed yourself. Though I wish that feeling did not have to come from you putting yourself in danger."

He glanced around their corner of the garden. "And I do not think Bannack will recognize me that easily. He . . . has several employees who match my physique."

"And he is quite the opposite," Jasmine noted. "In physique, I mean." Jasmine looked up at Barrett. "Perhaps we should have switched roles. I know how to blend in to the background, but you are not very good at being small and unnoticed, are you?"

He shrugged, looking back at her with a smile. "When you are on the mast, you generally want your fellow sailors to see you."

"Please, then," Jasmine teased, "take the spotlight. I have made an actual mess of everything I attempted to do tonight."

Barrett pulled a handful of wet papers from his pocket. "Your . . . delicate handlings have gotten us this far."

Jasmine laughed, hoping that the few pages they had access to would give them something. Anything. "Fine then, just leave the delicate handlings to me." She squeezed his arm. "I'll let you know when I need some muscle."

"It is a deal," he said.

Jasmine took her hand back, flexing it. Barrett had plenty of muscle.

He slowly separated the top sheet and handed it to her. "We will need more light than this," he said.

They inched closer to an external lantern and pored over the small handwritten texts. The pages contained lists of numbers in a tidy hand. They carefully reviewed them all.

"I only see numbers and dates. Can you see anything amiss?" Jasmine asked, fear creeping back in.

Barrett shook his head. "He clearly values whatever it is that ships through Virmur, but nothing here looks unusual."

"We have nothing, then," Jasmine said. "And I might have ruined the prospect of the contingency plan."

Barrett raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

Jasmine shrank her head down toward her neck in mock embarrassment. "Ivran seemed quite put out with me by the end of the evening." Suddenly she felt very warm, as if it were improper to discuss her future marriage plans with Barrett. "Not that I am disappointed," she said, defending herself. "I have definitively decided that I do not wish to accept his proposal. However . . ." Her shoulders dropped. "It might be my last chance to save Poppy."

"We still have this." Barrett pulled an envelope from his other pocket. This one was quite fresh and not covered in cider. It was sealed shut with dark-green wax.

"You have the letter he just wrote?" Jasmine asked, excitement returning.

He bent the envelope at the wax seal, cracking it easily between his large hands.

"We are going to read his correspondence?" Jasmine asked.

"Yes." Barrett looked up at her, confused at her hesitance.

"It feels wrong," Jasmine said.

"We just read through his business papers," Barrett said. "How is this any different?"

"It is just wrong." Jasmine shook her head, more to herself than to him. "I do not have anything else to explain. But go ahead."

"Well, if it helps, it is a fake correspondence," Barrett said, thankfully not laughing at her. "The letter he is responding to was written by me."

"What?" Jasmine repeated his sentence in her head before its meaning became clear. "The letter you brought into the sculpture room was your own? When did you have time to write that?"

Barrett shrugged. "I needed an excuse to get into that room with you. So I made up a quick correspondence from Port Virmur."

“What did it say?” Jasmine asked, thankful for his quick thinking.

“It said that the constables were on their way to inspect the fire at first light and asked him where to send the few items that survived the damage. I suggested here, assuming that would upset him.”

“But you do not know if any items did survive?” Jasmine could feel her mind working to keep up. Things had been happening so quickly all evening, and it was catching up to her.

“But I know Bannack Shipping. And he will have men on site all through the night to ensure that the constables find nothing illegal. So I sent him a message from that perspective.”

“And he believed it,” Jasmine said. “That is brilliant. Except. Then I did not need to make a fool of myself a second time and spill cider all over his office?”

“That,” Barrett said, nudging her shoulder with his arm, “was brilliant and some incredibly quick thinking. It took everything in me not to laugh out loud.”

Jasmine warmed under his praise, and from her own embarrassment. “Then it was not for naught,” she said. “Let us read this letter.”

Barrett opened the envelope and slid out a sheet of parchment, quickly scanning it.

“He says to send it to the old office at Port Punta with the rest of the overstock. He will send new muscle there immediately to receive the shipment.”

“So whatever he is selling, there is more of it that is undamaged at Port Punta?” Jasmine said.

Barrett slid the letter back into his pocket. “I need to get down there as quickly as possible.” He turned toward the door.

“Barrett.” Jasmine touched his arm. “It will be extra guarded. How do you intend to get inside?”

He grinned back at her. “Have you forgotten that I work there?”

CHAPTER 11

“I will meet you back at Edward’s cottage at first light,” Barrett said. He tucked the papers and letter back into his coat pocket.

“No,” Jasmine replied. “I am not staying here. I am coming with you.”

Barrett shook his head, looking over her shoulder at the door to the main hall. “There is no reason for that.”

“If you do not find the incriminating evidence,” Jasmine countered, “then I must hastily secure this proposal. So I think there very much is a reason for that.”

“Then stay here and keep an eye on Bannack,” Barrett pointed at her, then to the main hall. “The dancing will continue until sunup, I presume?” he asked. “I will return by then or send word to you.”

Jasmine nodded. She desperately did not want to leave his side, or rather, she desperately did not want to stay at the ball. His words made sense. She should remain close to Ivran.

Barrett left her, striding back into the main hall. He stopped at the doorway, pausing for a moment to rub his temples before he stepped into the bright room.

Jasmine followed after him, her pace slower and her destination less clear. If it were less cold, she would prefer to wait in the calm outdoor garden rather than the busy ballroom. But it was just before midnight; the cold would only intensify for the next several hours. She needed to find a warmer place inside the building, hopefully one that was also quiet and out of the way.

She slipped inside the ballroom, immediately overwhelmed by the overpowering sounds of the small orchestra and the cloying air of the humid, warm environment.

Barrett was halfway across the room, weaving his way through the side of the crowd toward the main exit. His height made him easy to track.

Jasmine turned in the opposite direction. The smaller rooms along the back of the hall would offer a better chance for quiet. Except for the ice sculpture gallery—quiet as it might be, she preferred to avoid that room.

Just thinking of the life-sized ice-cold version of herself made her shiver.

Once at the back of the room, she peered down the hallway to Ivran’s office, curious if he had left it yet. Two footmen stood guard outside the door, but there was no sight of him.

Jasmine turned to survey the ballroom, hoping for one more glimpse of Barrett. But she could no longer see even his tall form through the crowd. Not unless she, herself, became taller.

She moved toward the nearby raised stage for society's elite.

As confidently as Ivran had three days prior, Jasmine strode toward the guarded stairs of the stage. The footmen let her pass without question. It could have been the confidence or her known connection to Ivran, or perhaps even her own surname that gave her access. At the top of the short staircase, she stepped aside and looked back out over the room. The view here was infinitely better. Barrett's tall head bobbed along, almost to the main door.

He stopped, stumbling a little bit, before righting himself and talking to someone.

Jasmine craned her neck to see what was happening.

Barrett quickly left the conversation and nearly ran out the door. The crowd parted just at the right spot for her to see Ivran standing in the place Barrett had just vacated and staring after him.

That was not good. Ivran continued to stare after Barrett left. Jasmine could not see his expression from across the room, but she dashed back down the stairs and threw herself into the crowd.

Time to distract Ivran from his own thoughts. By the time she had Ivran back in her sights, however, he was talking to one of his footmen. Ivran pointed at the main door, and the footman nodded before moving purposefully out of the building.

Jasmine looked between Ivran and the retreating footman. It was perhaps too late to distract Ivran. She had no doubt that if it came down to a physical fight, Barrett could easily overpower the fancily dressed footman, but she would not let him be taken by surprise.

With a spin on the soft leather soles of her dancing slippers, she too made a dash for the door.

No one seemed to notice her as she left the main hall and found the coatroom. With the attendants' help, she quickly gathered her cloak and boots, and Barrett's fur coat.

She hurried out of the main building, cold air slapping her exposed face. She blinked in the darkness, using the light of the bonfires to search the surrounding area. Barrett was moving along the side of the square, still easy to spot. But where was Ivran's footman?

There.

The footman was talking to a group of intimidatingly large men who guarded the broad steps up to Bannack Hall. Ivran was obsessively worried about security. Jasmine wondered why she had never found that odd before, but she had no time to think.

The footman pointed through the crowd toward Barrett. Several of the bully-backs nodded in understanding and started to peel away from the group.

She had to get to him first. *Those* men could do damage in a physical altercation.

Jasmine picked up her skirts and ran. Her thin dancing slippers slid across the icy pavestones, and she put her weight on her toes to stay as agile as possible.

She did not skirt around the crowd as Barrett had. She ran straight through the square, taking a direct route to the far road Barrett was headed for.

"Barrett!" she yelled when she was close enough to be within shouting distance.

Her voice got lost in the crackling fires, the celebratory townsfolk, and the muting effect of freshly fallen snow.

"Barrett!" she yelled again, quickly gaining on him as she ran.

He stopped, turning his head.

She did not waste time looking behind her, just barreled toward her target. Her soaking slippers had no grip on the slushy ground, and she opened her arms to use his body as a brake.

He caught her in time, swinging her around him to negate the force of the stop.

"The bully-backs," Jasmine said through panting breaths. "They are spreading into the square to search for you."

Barrett looked over her head. He must have caught sight of the men moving off the steps because he hunched forward, leaning on Jasmine to disguise his height.

He moved toward the alley closest to them, as they were already on the side of the square.

"They have already seen you," Jasmine said. "This way." She pulled him deeper into the center of the crowd instead, crouching behind a street cart. The buttery smell of stewed oysters wafted from the cart.

Jasmine resisted the urge to stand up and purchase a bowl of it. She could not remember the last time she had eaten. She huddled into Barrett, moving around the back of the cart to stay out of sight.

Moments later, two of Ivran's men passed by the cart and headed into the alley Barrett had been headed for.

"They are patrolling the perimeter of the square now," Barrett said. "It might take a while to get out of here unnoticed." Behind him, an ominous glow lit the main street, quickly followed by the sound of a raucous crowd singing a piously unharmonized hymn.

A group of lamplighters led the singers as they moved through the streets. The lighting ceremony. It was midnight!

"This way," Jasmine said. She stood up, pulling Barrett toward the oncoming procession.

He followed her, keeping his head down and shoulders hunched.

As the singing stream of people poured into the already crowded square, Jasmine pulled Barrett into the flow. They clung to each other, catching their breath as they let the people carry them forward. They were moving uphill, away from the docks, but the dense procession would carry them through—and hopefully out of—the town square.

Some of the bully-backs spread out around the procession, searching the faces of passing people.

Barrett dropped his tall head, covering Jasmine as they hid.

"Here," Jasmine said, "this will help." She reluctantly pulled herself away from Barrett's warm embrace and handed him the fur coat. "Put this on."

As Barrett struggled into his coat, Jasmine led them along with the crowd.

The bully-backs patrolled the edge of the procession, moving against the flow.

Having recovered her breath, Jasmine listened for the words to the song and slowly joined in. If they were going to blend in, they were going to blend in all the way.

Keeping his head low, Barrett joined her.

As scared as she was, Jasmine felt her chest swell. Her voice was not particularly beautiful, but she loved to sing. And Barrett's deep bass flowed over her.

His voice was beautiful. It was deep, warm, and powerful. Jasmine could tell he was not singing at full volume, but the sound still carried, enveloping her in a calming warm bubble. He was a sailor, after all, and his lungs were likely accustomed to singing sea shanties over the noise of the waves.

The crowd surged through the town square. At the front of the procession, the lamplighters lit each street lantern in their path, reaching up to the wicks with their tall poles.

The lighting part itself was less dramatic than it usually was as the bonfires throughout the square already brightened the space. The procession continued up the hill toward the church where it ended each year. As was custom, several of the participants wandered away in the square, joining in the local festivities and ending their procession early.

Barrett lifted his head, surveying the crowd. "I do not see them," he rumbled to Jasmine. "I think they have moved on down the street."

"That is the direction we need to go," Jasmine replied, not sure if her voice carried over the caroling. "We shall have to be careful as we move toward the port."

Barrett grasped her hand, ducking down low again as he leveraged his size to push his way out of the procession.

Jasmine clung to his hand, keeping herself as close to his side as possible.

They slipped into a small alleyway, dashing into the darkness together.

After a few long minutes, Barrett pulled them to a halt. He wrapped his arm around Jasmine and huddled over her in a darkened doorway. "Wait for a moment," he whispered. "To see if we were followed."

Jasmine leaned into him, breathing deeply as her heart raced.

He had not fully buttoned his coat in the flurry of the escape, and she found herself grasping the fur while pressing her face into the opening at his chest. She wanted to melt into his warmth.

Her mind told her that this was improper, but her heart told her it was right. They had already been through so much together. Jasmine felt completely right in seeking a moment of comfort with Barrett.

His strong arm wrapped around her, holding her in place and encouraging her to relax.

Her breathing slowed. He was safe.

"I think we lost them," he whispered, his lips moving in her hair.

CHAPTER 12

With the streetlamps now lit, Punta felt awake despite the late hour. “We need to stay off the main route,” Barrett said.

Jasmine nodded. “Wait, I need a moment.” She still carried her boots; she had been clutching them to her chest as she ran. Setting them on the ground, she kicked off her dancing slippers.

Barrett dropped to his knees in the snow in front of her and picked up a boot.

“You do not . . .” Jasmine started to protest. Her dress was already wet and dirty beyond repair. She had no qualms about sinking to the ground herself to put on her own shoes.

But this was faster.

“Thank you,” she said, lifting her skirts and extending her foot.

“Your stockings are soaked,” Barrett said as he held her heel, guiding it into the boot.

“It is a little too late to do anything about that now,” Jasmine replied with a wry laugh.

“It is also far too cold tonight to have wet feet,” Barrett said, pulling the boot back off her foot. “At least let me remove some of the snow and ice.” He gently ran his hand over her ankle, where the snow had stuck to her wool stockings as she’d run through the streets. “There. Less can melt into your boots now.”

“Thank you,” Jasmine said, touched by his thoughtful action. She leaned forward, using his shoulder once again to support her weight as they maneuvered her foot back into the shoe.

This.

This was so easy. She could feel every part of her body, from her icily numb toes to the warmth under her ribcage. She felt alive.

In a few quick motions, Barrett laced her boots. Jasmine wanted to tease him about being a sailor who knew his knots, but she could not find the words to actually turn it into a joke, so she laughed to herself.

Barrett looked up at her, grinning into his dimple as he stood. “What are you giggling about?”

Jasmine shook her head, self-conscious of her silly thoughts. But this was Barrett, and it felt even sillier to be bashful in front of him, especially when his dimple showed through his beard.

Jasmine rearranged the cloak around her shoulders. “I was just thinking that you are very good at quickly tying knots—which is a silly thing to be impressed by, and

so I was going to tease you about it—but it makes sense that you are good at it because you have been a sailor for so many years, so I was afraid it would be rude to tease you about something you are good at, and sometimes things are more funny in my head so I decided not to say anything out loud, but now here I am.”

Barrett smiled. “I think it is more fun if you share the teasing, even if it is not the most clever.”

Jasmine smiled, thankful that Barrett had not laughed at her. Sharing thoughts with him was just as fun and easy as sharing them with Poppy. And frankly, Poppy was more likely to laugh at Jasmine than with her.

She stepped forward, pushing away from the wall and grabbing Barrett’s arm. “We need to go. Or Ivran will get to the port first and warn everyone that you are not to be trusted.”

His smile narrowed and he stood up taller, glancing quickly around the area. He held out his hand to her. “Charming and intelligent,” he said. “Let’s go.”

Assuming his words were a compliment to her, Jasmine grabbed his hand and poured her energy into speed. Leaving her ruined slippers behind, she relished the support and insulation of her boots that were built for this kind of weather.

Despite the late hour, she found it easy to keep up a steady pace as the roads to the port were all downhill.

The landed portion of the port itself consisted of several buildings along the waterfront that surrounded the quay—a flat area of dock along the water for loading and unloading the ships. Barrett eased them through the darker streets until they had a full view of the docking area.

It was brightly lit from lanterns around the perimeter, and a ship was anchored in the loading area. Presumably, it was the ship that Barrett had arrived in several hours prior. Some sailors and dockhands were transporting crates and boxes both onto and off of the ship. Jasmine guessed that most of the cargo had been unloaded, though, based on the palettes of crates that filled the docking area.

The dizzying crane overhead was not currently in use, but Jasmine still found it ludicrous that several men were hard at work preparing the ship for its next voyage. It was the middle of the night in freezing cold weather, and it was Christmas Eve. But what had Ivran said? “*The world continues to turn.*” Bannack Shipping took no time off.

Barrett, however, was not looking at the ship. “That is the office we want to enter,” he said, pointing to a brick building across the quay.

Jasmine noticed that he included her in his “we” without question. And while she loved the sound of it, she had no time to dwell on the happy feelings that brought her.

The single-storied brick building had a locked iron grate in front of the wooden door, additional iron grates over the windows, and a single man standing guard out front. This was the first of Ivran’s bully-backs that appeared larger than Barrett. Where did Ivran find all these giant-like workers?

“What is the layout of the office?” Jasmine asked.

Barrett scrunched his forehead. “I do not remember. I have only been inside it once, actually . . .” He hesitated. “It was the day Bannack hired me, actually. There is a door in the front, obviously, and I remember a smaller door in the back. I think there are windows on the back as well? You stay here. I’ll go around the building and try to climb up a window grating. The roof looks flat. There is likely an access point up there.”

Jasmine touched his arm, wordlessly signaling for him to wait. “Or . . .” she started. She did not have a plan fully formed, but she voiced her thoughts anyway.

"That is your ship, right?" she asked. "You run onto the quay, they all know you. Say that you've just come from Ivran, and you spin some tale about how the fire in Virmur was not accidental and that Ivran is sending additional guards to this location because they are expecting a break-in here as well."

Barrett chuckled. He made no vocal sound, but she could hear the rapid exhalation from his nose. "That is brilliant," he said. "I am the messenger, warning them against myself. But how does that get us into the old office?"

"I am still working on that part of the plan," Jasmine said. "If you are causing the distraction, that leaves me to enter the building somehow. I could try climbing up some grate on the back to get to the roof myself." She looked down at her dress. "Although that is not the most practical solution."

"What if you provide the distraction and I climb up the back wall?" Barrett suggested.

"I have been providing the distraction all night!" Jasmine countered.

Barrett smiled that half smile of his, the single dimple making it look lopsided. "A task you have been excelling at," he muttered.

"We do not have time for this," Jasmine said. "Ivran's actual messenger could be here any minute."

"What is the plan, then?" Barrett asked.

"A combination of things. You will just walk in the front door," Jasmine said, the pieces falling into place in her mind. "Grab a crate from somewhere out of sight and walk in demanding entry. You can warn them about the future you coming as well. That will throw them off enough that they should not question your request."

Barrett tilted his head from side to side. "Climbing up the back is less risky."

"But it does not guarantee our entrance. The roof is likely as locked up as the front door. Your shipmates know you left immediately to find Edward, right? No one will question that you carry a message back from the fire."

Barrett nodded. "I see your point."

"I'll be behind the building if you can find a way to let me in," Jasmine said. "Once I'm inside, you can exit the front door without any fuss, and I will let you in the back. No one the wiser."

"A brilliant plan." Barrett turned to make his way back to the main street.

"Stay safe," Jasmine called after him, her voice barely a whisper. She had no idea if he actually heard it or not.

She followed him more discreetly, staying in the shadows. She would have to cross the main street farther up but intended to do so once Barrett had everyone's attention.

She watched him stride onto the quay, the silhouette of a hulking shadow as the lanterns in front of him were far brighter than those on the street. Perhaps Bannack was using his magical lights to help his men work later into the night. That seemed a cruel use of such beautiful tools.

Jasmine watched Barrett walk directly up to the brick building and nod to the man at the door. He had found a large wooden crate, which he carried easily.

Jasmine could not hear what was said, but she could see Barrett moving his head as he spoke. The guard crossed his arms, not convinced, and appeared to be questioning Barrett.

Jasmine shifted her weight from one foot to the other, anxious for this to work. She needed to cross the street and get behind the brick building, but she also needed to make sure that Barrett got through.

Maybe she should have been the one to burst onto the quay with a distraction. But a woman in formal dress would have been more complicated to explain than a

fellow sailor.

She crept closer, sticking to the shadows.

Barrett had not yet convinced the guard to let him pass. "Hey, Quinn!" Barrett yelled across the quay, his deep voice carrying up the street to Jasmine. "Make yourself useful for once and come hold this crate for me. This numbskull is slower than you, and my arms are falling off. I don't want to drop the good stuff."

Jasmine covered her mouth to hide her snort of laughter. She liked the sailor side of Barrett.

One of the sailors responded to Barrett's call and sprinted across the quay. "Aye, aye, Hilliard!"

Barrett greeted him, continuing to speak while moving his head enthusiastically. As he was no longer yelling, his voice did not carry up the street. But the call to his comrade must have convinced the guard, because he finally unlocked the door and allowed Barrett inside.

Jasmine dashed across the street, rounding to the back of the building.

Contrary to what Barrett had suggested, there were no windows on the back wall, so he would not have been able to scale it. There was, however, the small door he had mentioned. It was the only opening at the back and was also protected by a grate.

Jasmine crouched in the shadows close to the door's entrance. She waited, not able to hear anything through the layers of brick. Her heart raced until she heard Barrett fumbling with the inner lock.

He quietly opened the door, though the iron grate still separated them.

Jasmine smiled, relieved to see him, though he probably could not make out her face in the darkness.

He fumbled for a few moments with the lock on the grate.

"Does it require a key?" Jasmine whispered. She reached up to her head, feeling for a hairpin. "Try this."

Barrett took the pin and continued to poke at the lock.

Jasmine stopped breathing, her heart now slowing to a stop. This was taking too long.

The lock clicked, and Barrett pushed open the grate.

Jasmine quickly slid inside and dropped behind a stack of crates.

"What is taking so long?" an angry voice at the front door called. More light poured into the room as the angry-voiced man opened the front door wider and stepped inside.

"Just finding a safe place so the goods do not topple," Barrett replied. He tapped the crate next to him and moved out of Jasmine's view as he followed the guard outside.

The door shut heavily behind them, leaving her alone in darkness.

CHAPTER 13

Jasmine closed her eyes. It was easier to face the dark when she was not looking at it.

When she blinked her eyes open a few moments later, however, she realized she was not in complete darkness. A soft overhead glow just barely illuminated the room around her.

She looked up.

The ceiling of this office was made entirely of glass, just like Bannack Hall. The brick walls of the building rose higher than the flat roof, so one could not see the glass from outside the building.

Jasmine pressed her eyebrows together in confusion even as she smiled in delight. The room was quite beautiful with the open space above. She felt like she could breathe easier because she could see the sky. However, at the same time, the glass ceiling seemed entirely impractical. Especially for a utilitarian office by the wet and windy docks.

Why was it there? Ivran clearly liked glass ceilings. Maybe he had hired an architect to transform this office before they had built the much larger roof of Bannack Hall.

No matter how it came to be, Jasmine was grateful for the small amount of light it currently provided. She stood up quietly and started to examine the crates around her.

After several long minutes, Barrett came up to the unlocked back door, rapping quietly before he opened it and slipped inside.

"I am over here," Jasmine whispered in the darkness.

Barrett walked cautiously toward her. She reached a hand out to steady him, her eyes more accustomed to the near darkness.

"I have not found anything yet," she whispered. "A few of the crates are not bolted shut, so I opened them, but it is too dark to see inside." She guided him to the nearest open crate. "And I did not particularly want to reach into a strange box in the dark."

"I cannot blame you for that," Barrett whispered back. She heard him shuffle something in his hands and then the tell-tale sound of a match striking against a matchbox.

For a moment, the small flame blinded her, but her eyes adjusted to the light as it filled the space around her. A small, dingy room was left, with a desk in the back. Most of the space seemed like it was being used for storage, however. Boxes filled

the room, several stacks deep in places.

Barrett held a small tin matchbox, and Jasmine watched in fascination as he used the flame to light a wick on the corner of the matchbox itself, turning it into a small oil lamp.

He held the light up, and Jasmine lifted the lid of one of the crates next to her.

They both leaned over the crate.

Inside it, packed between straw, were several bottles of ginever. Jasmine tentatively pulled one out.

"Ginever?" she whispered. "Ivran kept bottles of this in his safe at the other office. Why would this be so valuable to him?"

"He kept this in his safe?" Barrett asked, also lifting a bottle.

"Yes," Jasmine said. "He even tried to get me to drink some."

"Did you?" Barrett asked immediately, his voice loud with alarm.

"Hush," Jasmine reminded him. "No, of course not. It upsets my stomach."

Barrett visibly relaxed.

"Why?" Jasmine asked, suddenly suspicious of the bottle in her hand. "I know it has been gaining popularity, but not enough to make a man as rich as Ivran, right?" Jasmine thought about it and answered the question for herself. "If the burned warehouses stored bottles of ginever, that could not be enough to ruin Bannack Shipping."

Barrett said nothing. He intently studied the bottle in his hand, turning it over and testing the waxed cork against the side of the crate.

"Open another box," Jasmine said. "There has to be something else."

They moved down the line, peeking into as many boxes as they could.

All of them contained the same thing.

Jasmine started to fully empty a crate, pulling out bottle after bottle and setting them on the floor. "What is he hiding?" she said, her frustration growing. She grabbed handfuls of straw from the bottom of the crate, searching through it.

Barrett stood in place, as if frozen.

"Is something wrong?" Jasmine asked in alarm. "Did you hear something?"

Barrett slammed the palm of his free hand against his forehead.

"Another head pain?" Jasmine rushed to his side. "It is still getting worse?" she asked, although the answer to her question was quite obvious.

Barrett remained frozen in place, pressing his hand against his forehead. He was not speaking, and he was barely breathing.

Jasmine gently put her hand on his upper arm, wanting him to know that she was present but not wanting to overstimulate him.

When he started to breathe more normally, she gently gripped his arm and guided him to the floor. "Sit for a moment," she said.

He followed her lead, clearly still in considerable pain.

"Does this happen frequently?" Jasmine asked. "Should we take you to a physician?" She looked around the room of crates. They were near the middle of the room, having checked inside several boxes from different stacks. "We are finding nothing here . . ." she started, worried about the lack of progress in their mission. Fear clawed at her heart. That was not the only thing she was worried about. "I am worried for you."

She wanted to reach out and touch him. To hold him as they had held each other while running through the streets. She settled for touching his arm again.

"Do not be worried," Barrett said. "This will pass." His voice sounded strained. "It has happened before." He moved his hand to the side of his head, uncovering his eyes and looking at Jasmine. "It was long ago. I do not fully remember it—" He

stopped, closing his eyes again. "The light is painful."

Barrett leaned forward, bringing the small oil lamp up to his face, and blew out the flame.

Jasmine squeezed her eyes shut, adjusting to the full darkness.

Barrett exhaled a long breath. "We were at sea when it happened last time, several years ago. A storm threw us off course." He paused, still breathing heavily. "It should have been a short trip, so we ran low on food. That was the first time this happened. I thought my head would surely split open from the pain."

"When was the last time you have eaten?" Jasmine cut in. "I knew I should have gotten a bowl of that oyster stew," she mumbled to herself, remembering the milky warm aroma from the street cart.

"It was not the food that eventually relieved the head pains." Barrett stayed silent for a few more moments in the darkness.

Jasmine desperately wanted to know the answer, to know how to relieve his current pain, but she had a feeling this particular memory was unpleasant. He was explaining it to her in such a roundabout method.

Perhaps he felt ashamed of this weakness?

"You can tell me, Barrett," she said gently.

"It was when we restocked the ginever," he rumbled in a low whisper, barely more than a breath.

"The ginever?" Jasmine asked, surprised. "Any ginever?" She picked up a bottle on the floor beside them. "Would this work?" She scraped against the wax seal that covered the cork.

"No, Jasmine." Barrett reached out in the darkness, finding her hands and stopping her action. "Well, technically yes. It would work. Not any ginever, but this ginever in particular. Only Bannack's. I have not had any in several weeks."

Jasmine still held the bottle. "Several weeks? That does not make sense. The effects should lessen over time, not increase."

"Bannack does something to his ginever," Barrett said. "I began to suspect it some time ago, but I cannot fathom what it is. Whatever it is, he hoards it too greatly."

Jasmine felt her hand tingle against the bottle she was holding, as though whatever contaminated the liquid would affect her through the glass. She set the bottle on the ground, wiping her hand against her cloak. "How is your head?" she asked. "You have been speaking in longer sentences."

"The pain is passing," Barrett confirmed.

"Tell me everything you can remember," Jasmine said, tucking her knees to the side as she settled more comfortably onto the floor. "We will find out what is going on. For Edward and Poppy, and for you."

"Everything I can remember?" he repeated. "About what? Everything is many things—too many things."

"Start from the beginning," Jasmine encouraged. "I have wanted to know what happened to you since the moment you walked out of our door seven years ago—to the day. But . . . for the sake of time, perhaps stick to any memories or thoughts related to Bannack? And what you know of his ginever?"

She could practically hear Barrett smile. "I was thirteen that Christmas, when Ivran took me on as a cabin boy. Hired me himself back then. It was before Bannack Shipping was renowned. I was tall for my age, and Ivran offered twice the going rate." He paused.

Jasmine stayed silent, content to listen.

“Edward was only ten. Our parents were gone, and he was still in school. He was brilliant, actually. Still is. I wanted him to stay in school as long as possible, longer than me. I was willing to do whatever it took to give him that chance.”

Jasmine repeated his final sentence in her head while she waited for him to speak again.

He said nothing more, though, and as her eyes once again adjusted to the little bit of starlight that shone through the glass above her, she could see him turn his face to the side. Away from her.

“You were willing to do whatever it took . . .” Jasmine repeated. The words brought another sentence to mind. One he had spoken earlier that night, although it felt a lifetime ago. He’d said it so ominously then that the words had etched themselves into her memory. “You said there is always a price for working for Bannack.”

She gently took the bottle from him and encompassed his large hand in both of her own. His hands were big, warm. Calloused from years of hauling harsh, wet rope at sea. Small pieces of his rough skin caught on her smooth hands. The sensation sent shivers down her spine.

“What was the price, Barrett?” she asked, gently circling her thumbs across the backs of his hands.

“I do not fully know,” Barrett replied, his voice bitter. “Bannack’s sailors, the bully-backs, all of us big ones. He did something to us that makes us stronger, bigger, less affected by pain.”

“He did what though?” Jasmine’s voice squeaked. That explained Barrett’s exceptional height. And the overly powerful average body size of Ivran’s employees.

“You will think I am insane,” Barrett said.

“Are you worried about what I think of you?” Jasmine retorted. She was losing her patience. “After you told me to share my silly thoughts about tying knots earlier? No. It is your turn to share your silly thoughts.”

Barrett chuckled under his breath. “I cannot argue with that.” He remained silent for a few more heavy breaths. “He said I would forget as soon as I awoke. But I did not forget. I remembered everything. At least I think I did. Do. But when I ask other sailors about it, they laugh at me. So either I am crazy, or everyone else did forget.”

Jasmine waited.

He took another long pause.

She wanted to wring the information out of him. “Forget what?” she prodded.

“That first night. When he took me in here and offered me the job. Bannack . . . laid magic on me. Like a curse.”

Jasmine narrowed her eyes. “Maybe you are insane.”

Barrett leaned away from her. “See, I told you . . .”

“No, wait. I am thinking, and I will do so out loud for you since I just bullied you about it.” She gathered her thoughts. “Magic is fickle, as inconsistent as the starlight it comes from. It should not be possible to gather enough starlight to make magic work on a human! That is ludicrous. Insane, really.” Jasmine paused for a moment. “Except. Ivran’s fake stars at the fair. He was funding a tool to siphon magic through glass and store it . . .” She looked back at Barrett. “It is possible you have been cursed!” she said, more to herself than to him.

“I gathered as much,” Barrett said drily.

“That is terrifying,” Jasmine said, glad she had nothing in her stomach. She tightened her grip on his hands. “But this is not your fault,” she said to reassure him, or maybe she was reassuring herself. “You were only a child. You had no

choice.”

His arms went limp, his hands dropping to his knees, out of her grasp. “I did have a choice,” Barrett replied. “I signed some contracts, and Mr. Bannack explained that would make me stronger. I accepted it, eagerly even.” He dropped his head forward. “I . . .” He hesitated.

Jasmine leaned back, feeling as though a cold blast of wind from outside had struck her face. “What?”

He looked at her, gazing deep into her eyes. “I feel it as well, this ease between us. You were not the only one who went back to that hill above the cemetery.”

Jasmine’s blood pounded through her ears. She swallowed, shaking her head to make it go away. She wanted to hear every word that Barrett was saying.

“Every time we docked, I went back there. And thought of you, wondered what parts of you had changed and if the stars still reflected in your eyes.”

Jasmine felt something damp in her eyes. She was fairly certain it was not the reflection of the stars. “Barrett . . .”

“Imagine if we had met there, once.” He looked up at her then. “Perhaps we did, passing by each other without recognition.”

Jasmine shook her head, reaching her hands back out to surround his. “I would have noticed you immediately.”

This time he twisted his hands, encompassing hers instead. “You are wonderful, Jasmine. I am glad we found each other again, even if just for tonight.”

“Why do you say that?” Jasmine reprimanded. “We have Poppy and Edward now. I do not think you could get out of my life if you wanted to, and . . . I do not want you to.”

“Mayhap, in a different world,” Barrett said. He brought her hands to his face and nudged her fingers with his icy cold nose. “In a different time, we could pursue something more than friendship. But I am . . . *this*, Jasmine.” He gestured to his whole body without dropping her hands. “And you are brave, beautiful, and very bad at making jokes.”

Jasmine knew he was not trying to hurt her, but his rejection stung all the same. Not that it was even a rejection since there was nothing between them. And it was not like she had been imagining anything between them. It had only been a few hours!

She pulled her hands away, sitting back on her heels.

In those few hours she had felt more connected, seen, and alive than she ever had with any man prior. “I am so glad we found each other again,” she whispered in the dark, wishing the words to be truer than the hurt she simultaneously felt.

She pulled her skirts more tightly around her. As the silk fabric slid over the wood floor, it snagged on a splinter.

She reached down to gently dislodge the dress, which she realized a moment later was useless since the dress was already ruined. But as she loosened the fabric, she saw that the splinter was not merely a piece of rough floorboard but rather part of a symbol carved into the floorboard itself.

She brushed back her skirts and examined the symbol as best she could with her fingers.

“Barrett?” she asked. “Can you relight your little lantern?”

Barrett responded instantly, reaching for the matchbox even though he did not say anything. He held the light over her, following her gaze.

Under her fingertips, Jasmine saw a small circle, about the size of her palm. Inside the circle, several dots had been gouged out from the floor. She instantly recognized the shape of Cerberus, the constellation of the three-headed dog.

A larger curved line bent around the outside of the circle. She followed the line with her eyes and beckoned Barrett closer with the light. He shuffled forward on his knees.

The light revealed a larger circle, about as wide as Jasmine was tall. At several points around the big circle, smaller symbols were etched into the wood. Jasmine walked around the circle, bending down to get a closer look at the individual symbols. She saw several constellations that she recognized. They were laid out on the floor in the order that they appeared in the sky.

Between the constellations, flowing lines pointed across the circle, matching certain symbols together or spinning off into visual representations of light rays, star beams, glass prisms, and the phases of the moon.

The entire image reminded Jasmine of the star maps she had seen at the world fair. However, those had made much more sense than this.

At the very center of the room, directly beneath the glass ceiling, an astrolabe was carved into the wood floor, its concentric circles surrounded by small numbers. Two rotating pieces of wood, long and thin, were attached at the center of the astrolabe like the hands of a clock. Jasmine gently nudged one of the “clock hands” with her foot. It rotated easily around the center point, aligning different elements of the inner astrolabe with the constellations on the edge of the circle.

“Is this some sort of navigational device?” Jasmine asked. It felt like a silly question, as she was quite familiar with studying the stars, and she had never seen anything like this. She looked up at Barrett.

He stared at the circle. “I think I did forget this part.”

“Barrett?” Jasmine asked. “What is it?”

CHAPTER 14

Before he had a chance to answer, they heard a commotion coming from the quay.

“Bannack wants all eyes on the alert for Barrett Hilliard!” a loud voice called outside. They could hear him so clearly, he must have been yelling directly at the guard at the door. “He may try to enter this building. You two, around back.”

Barrett immediately blew out the small flame.

“Hilliard?” the guard outside the door said. “He was already here. Left some ten minutes ago.”

“Here? Already?” The messenger sounded alarmed. “You, send word to Ivran! He will want to hear this!”

“Ivran!” Jasmine panicked, looking around the room. They needed to get out.

The muffled steps moved away from the front door, and the man continued to yell orders.

Jasmine ran to the back door. Barrett grabbed her arm. “The streets will be swarming with Ivran’s men. We are safer in here. For now.”

“Can we make a place to hide, then?” Jasmine asked. She moved through the shadowy stacks of crates, looking for a space large enough to climb into. The dim light overhead was not enough to properly see by, however.

Jasmine looked up at the glass ceiling, begging the stars to provide more light.

Barrett, also, was staring up. “That looks like a hatch,” he said, pointing to one of the glass panes. “We can climb up to it.”

Quickly and quietly, Barrett stacked several crates below the hatch. “You first,” he said.

Jasmine approached the dark stack. She did not think she was scared until her feet left the ground. The crates were fairly stable, and Barrett had positioned them to be more like a staircase than a ladder. But it was still difficult to navigate. Especially in a dress. In the dark.

She felt Barrett’s body behind her, his hand on her back.

At least it was too dark to look down.

She climbed higher, Barrett moving with her, staying close. When her head touched the glass, she leaned forward, grasping at the handle on the hatch.

Barrett’s hand closed around hers, easily pushing the panel upward as the metal hinges of the hatch creaked in protest.

Jasmine poked her head above the roof, glad that the tall brick walls still hid her from sight. It sounded as though several more men had arrived at the quay, judging

by the increase in voices and footsteps. She awkwardly climbed through the hole in the roof, freezing her hands against the cold glass and ironwork as she crawled away to make room for Barrett.

He followed soon after her, closing the hatch behind him.

Jasmine found it disconcerting to have her entire body supported by a length of glass, even if the glass was quite thick. She did not feel safe enough to stand, nor did she want to give away their position by peeking over the wall. She looked around.

A brick chimney rose through the roof against one wall, and the brick extended several hand-lengths into the roof around it, likely to protect the glass from heat.

She crawled in that direction. Barrett followed, on his feet but doubled over.

Jasmine sat on the brick surface with relief, leaning back against the chimney.

Barrett joined her, pulling her close to him, using their bodies as a barrier from the cold. "We will let it quiet down some, and then we can try climbing down the back or side wall," Barrett said. "We just need to stay warm since we might be up here for a while."

Jasmine tucked her skirt around her legs like a blanket.

They listened in silence for a few minutes as boots scurried around the building and more orders for a search party were shouted across the quay. Jasmine itched to know what was happening. She actively reminded herself not to stand and peer over the wall.

"Jasmine," Barrett said, his voice a low rumble that was somehow quieter than a whisper. "That circle on the floor, those constellations."

Jasmine leaned her face into his shoulder, both letting him know she was listening and enjoying the additional coverage from the elements.

"I stood in it, the day that Bannack hired me," Barrett said. "After I signed the papers, he rotated the rulers to certain points on the circle and told me to come back later that evening, after darkness fell. I sat in that circle for so long, I fell asleep. It was nearly dawn by the time I woke up. He gave me a ginever to break my fast."

"That sounds disgusting," Jasmine said. "Did anything feel different, sitting in the circle?"

"No, nothing. I did not feel anything at all," Barrett said. "He told me I would forget about the whole thing, and I assumed it was some sort of rite of passage. But I did not forget about it. Although the circle of symbols on the floor eventually faded from memory."

"But he gave you a bottle of ginever immediately afterward," Jasmine said, connecting the dots. "And it was the ginever that"—she looked up at him, searching his face—"staved off your headache? That one time?"

"The premium bottles were always available for the sailors, at least some of us. I thought I was just one of his favorites until I noticed that only the bigger men got the good stuff. That is why I stopped drinking it a few weeks ago."

"How is the good stuff different?" Jasmine asked. "Does it taste better? Or smell a certain way?"

"It tastes the same," Barrett responded, shaking his head. "Although, we did have a joke that it was better than the cat for getting rid of rats onboard the ship."

"I do not like the sound of that," Jasmine grimaced.

"Yes, but it worked. Only the premium stuff, though. Vermin were particularly drawn to it. They would ignore the regular bottles. We always said that only us big boys could handle rat poison—another reason no one questioned it, I think."

Jasmine looked down at the glass in front of her, trying to see the wooden symbols etched into the floor below. But it was too dark, and the glass only

reflected the stars above.

“So what I am hearing,” Jasmine summarized, “is that only the sailors who stood in the circle down there gained extraordinary strength. But that strength is somehow also tied to drinking premium ginever? Because if you do not drink it, you get head pains?”

Barrett remained silent, but Jasmine could feel him nodding above her.

“He used magic on you.” Jasmine was horrified as the pieces fell into place. “I do not know how that circle works, but it is under the glass ceiling. He must have found a way to siphon enough magic for a curse. A curse that must be fed by the ginever in some way. That is why the ceiling here is glass. He probably puts the ginever into the circle as well, siphoning the same curse into it.” She shuddered. “And that curse is powerful enough to kill rats.”

“So the magic in the ginever feeds the magic in the curse, dragging it out over time.” Barrett coughed. The sound started deep in his throat, almost as though he were gagging.

“Barrett.” Jasmine sat up, looking for his face. “Bannack Hall has a glass ceiling.”

Barrett did what sailors do best. He swore.

“If he were to place something on the floor, he could curse hundreds of people. He possibly already has!” Jasmine felt her voice rising and tried to control her volume.

“And he was relying on the ginever he’d stored at Virmur to amplify that.” Barrett got up on his knees, ready for action. “That is why he is so angry. Whatever large-scale curse he wants to enact is essentially powerless without the premium ginever to sell and keep it going.”

“We need to get this information to my father. The magic is poisoning the ginever. Is there a way to prove that without involving rats? That would be clear enough evidence to put Ivran and Bannack Shipping under a serious investigation.” Jasmine pushed up onto her knees as well. She was not sure what their next move would be, but she was ready to do something. “And it should be enough to take any blame off of Edward.”

They finally had it.

“Let us find a way down from here.” Barrett stood, peering carefully over the back wall.

CHAPTER 15

“The pain is easing,” Barrett whispered, sitting up.

Jasmine felt relief for his relief, but she also missed the weight of his head resting on her legs.

He pushed himself as if to stand.

“No.” Jasmine reached out to his shoulder. “There is nothing more to be said. Let us wait for the constables.”

Barrett nodded, breathing slowly and deeply.

“Can you really feel it?” Jasmine asked. “Your memories, slipping away?”

Barrett looked over at her, tilting his head to the side. “You are incredibly beautiful, but I do not seem to remember your name. Who are you?” The corner of his mouth turned up in a slight grin, exposing his dimple.

Even though she could hear the teasing in his voice, Jasmine let out a small yelp. She slapped her hand over her mouth. “Barrett,” she hissed.

“My thoughts do feel scrambled,” Barrett said, this time with seriousness. “But I think it might just be from the pain. I do not think I am a raving lunatic.”

Jasmine leaned closer, impulsively throwing her arms around him.

He caught her. Strong. Sturdy. Safe.

“Barrett,” she whispered in his ear. “I am not going to forget you, even if you forget me.” She hesitated. “I like this feeling between us.” She leaned back to see his whole face. “When this is all over, even if you forget, I promise I will tell you everything. I will make you remember.”

He squeezed her tightly.

“And even if this is the only time we get together, it was worth waiting seven years for.” She grinned to herself. “Well, mostly worth it.”

“Mostly?” Barrett leaned back, looking for her face.

“It would only truly be worth it if you gave me a kiss, right now, to remember you by.” Jasmine was joking, and she knew it. Keeping the moment light as they waited in darkness. But her heart hammered in her chest as she imagined that he might indeed give her what she asked for.

“A kiss?” Barrett’s low rumble moved closer to her head. Close enough that she could feel his lips tickling her ear. “A kiss for you to remember and me to forget?”

“Oh, I will remind you of it,” Jasmine replied, leaning her head against his. “I promised, remember? That will be the first thing I tell you the next time I see you, how horrible you are at first kisses.” She tilted her head back to see his eyes, grinning at her own clever retort.

But her eyes never found his.

The moment her face was angled correctly, he pressed his lips to hers.

She gasped in surprise but tilted her head to reach him better. His lips were impossibly soft, burning with heat. She pressed back against him, exhaling through her nose as her lungs melted along with her heart.

He kissed her slowly, breathing in through his nose, his breath brushing her face.

She clung to his neck, pulling him down, pulling him closer, promising to never let this moment go.

This was a memory she would treasure for a lifetime. She opened her eyes, realizing she wanted the visual to go with the sensory memory. She couldn't see much of Barrett clearly, cross-eyed as she was from the proximity.

It was still quite dark, but perhaps the stars had heard her prayer for more light. She could see the soft skin between his beard and his eyes, thick and tanned from his days at sea. She caught a glimpse of his lower eyelashes, dark and curling and so short. She'd never noticed the way that a person's lower lash thinned toward the end. Did everyone's lashes do that, or was it just his?

A clattering of hooves below brought her back to the world around her.

Jasmine sat up on her knees, bringing her eyes just level with the brick wall.

"Do not show yourself!" Barrett pulled at her.

"I am still in the shadow." She pushed him away.

From her vantage point, she had a clear view of the lantern-lit main street leading up the hill. A sturdy horse-drawn cart clattered down toward them at a tremendous pace. The tall cart consisted of a wide footboard surrounding an iron cage. Several constables calmly stood on the footboard, clinging to the outer bars of the cage as the cart raced along.

Jasmine glanced down and was met by brick wall. She could not see into the quay. And she was not going to risk raising her head any higher.

The black cart swerved to a stop in the street above the office building, however, still within her view.

The constables hopped off the cart, wearing their familiar blue jackets and tall, hard helmets. Jasmine felt comforted, but they were not in the clear yet.

"Hello," Ivran barked. He walked up to the cart, placing himself in Jasmine's view. "Just in time—who is in charge here?"

The final constable to disembark wore nothing of the usual blue uniform. Instead he was dressed in a fine black waistcoat, his powdered hair covered by a top hat.

Her father. Jasmine breathed a sigh of relief, feeling tension leave her body. She pushed up, wanting to call out to him, but Barrett held her in place.

"My father is here," she whispered, explaining her movement.

"And he would not be pleased to see you here," Barrett advised.

"Lord Caradoc," Ivran said from below, sounding surprised. "This is a small matter. There is no need to personally concern yourself with it."

"No need to personally concern myself with the affairs of a man who is about to become my family?" Jasmine's father said. His voice was somehow both condescending and welcoming.

"I am honored," Ivran replied. Jasmine could not make out his face, but he did not sound very honored.

"What is the meaning of this urgent summons?" Lord Caradoc asked.

"There is a dangerous lunatic on the roof of this building!" Ivran said, wasting no time in undermining Barrett's potential sanity. "I believe he may be responsible

for the arson at Port Virmur.”

Jasmine stiffened. That was a heavy accusation to bring against Barrett.

“The report said that Virmur was an accident and did not necessitate further investigation,” Lord Caradoc countered, his voice wary.

“This man has forced his way into two of my offices and all but admitted to guilt.” Ivran looked up at the roof.

Jasmine quickly dropped down, hoping the darkness had kept her hidden.

“Hilliard!” Ivran yelled. “Are you coming down yourself, or do I need to send someone up to fetch you!”

“Hilliard?” Lord Caradoc cut in, surprised.

“I am coming down,” Barrett yelled, angling his face toward the sky but keeping his eyes on Jasmine. “Stay here, my brilliant conspirator,” he whispered to her. “I can finish this alone, and your father will be none the wiser to your criminal activity.”

Jasmine rolled her eyes, a million thoughts racing through her head that she wanted to say to Barrett.

But he was already walking toward the hatch.

“Your plan was better!” she whisper-yelled across the glass roof.

He threw her a quick glance before he descended the hatch. She could not see his face, but she knew he was smiling.

As soon as he left the building below her, Jasmine crawled across the glass to the hatch.

“Yes, Hilliard,” Barrett said confidently outside the door. “My brother recently wed your younger daughter.”

Jasmine looked at the crates below her, easier to see now that the open door had shed some light upon them. What she could no longer see, however, were the participants of the conversation taking place just beyond the door.

“Lord Caradoc,” she heard Barrett address her father. “I have serious allegations to bring against Ivran Bannack and his shipping company. I have worked for him for seven years, and I have proof that he is using magic on his workers—and that he is infusing his ginever with a magical poison to control those workers.”

His announcement was met with silence, and Jasmine imagined the look of shock that Ivran would be feigning.

“My lord,” Ivran said, inching closer to Jasmine’s father, “Hilliard here is a madman. He has worked for me for several years, until his recent mental decline. I would not listen to anything he says.”

This announcement was also met with silence. But that did not surprise Jasmine. Her father did not use his words lightly.

“What proof can you show me of these allegations?” Lord Caradoc asked.

“I . . . I am proof, sir,” Barrett replied. “He placed a curse on me in this very building, under the starlight, seven years ago. Since then, I have grown to this unusual size. And I have seen the effects of his ginever, on myself and on others.”

Jasmine rocked back and forth on her knees. This was not the strongest argument, but he had not lost her father yet.

“And what are these effects?” Lord Caradoc asked.

“They seem to enhance the original curse that was placed on us, fueling our bodies to grow and preventing negative effects, like head pains. Bannack is infusing the ginever under starlight with the same curse he placed on me.”

Jasmine gathered up her sopping-wet skirts and stepped onto the precarious stack of crates below. Barrett was sounding more and more like a madman, and her father was not going to be convinced without proof.

She stepped backward down the crates, as if she were descending a ladder. Fortunately, gravity did most of the work, and her feet hit solid ground within seconds.

She quickly dropped to the floor, checking the door to see if anyone had noticed her movement. It seemed safe for now. The room was mostly still in shadow.

She looked around the office. What could she use as proof?

An all too familiar sound from outside the door caught her off guard. A guttural groan of pain. Jasmine felt her heart squeeze in her chest, and she instinctively moved toward the door.

"See!" Ivran yelled, a little too triumphantly. "He is not right in the head. You cannot listen to anything he says. Arrest him!"

Jasmine stopped. She still did not have proof. She spun around the room. The ginever. How could she prove the ginever was poisonous?

"As you cannot provide proof of your accusations, we will be bringing you in to the station for the time being," Lord Caradoc said.

Jasmine grabbed a bottle of ginever from the floor, her mind racing. She still had the final backup plan. Ivran had no idea she had taken part in any of this, and if she kept it that way, she could still try to marry him and use that leverage to help Poppy.

Only, Barrett would be paying the price.

Or, rather, she would be paying the price. She'd already experienced seven years without Barrett as her friend. She did not want to face a lifetime of that loneliness.

She paused, her mind racing. She had the final piece.

"I have proof!" she yelled, striding out of the office.

The complete look of shock on Ivran's face was worth it. He quickly schooled his emotions, however. "Miss Caradoc?" He was genuinely confused. "What are you doing here?"

Jasmine tried not to grimace from the bright lamps surrounding her. Barrett was bent over double, grasping his head.

Her father stared at her. He did not look particularly shocked, which surprised her, but he raised his eyebrows.

The quay on her left was as full as she imagined it would be during the day, but most of the men were standing still, watching the drama unfold.

"And what proof do you bring, Miss?" her father asked, treating her like he would anyone else.

Jasmine swallowed, bringing her attention back to the three men in front of her. "First, I would like to present this letter, signed and sealed by Ivran Bannack this very night." She turned to Barrett.

He had risen partially but was still holding his head. His eyes, which she could now clearly see in the light, were red, and sweat beaded on his forehead. He seemed to be looking through her, however, as his eyes were not focused. But he must have heard her, because he reached into his jacket and produced the cider-soaked papers from Ivran's other office.

"Thank you." Jasmine took them from his hand. They were strangely warm still, from his body heat. Her fingers trembled with cold as she gently sifted through them to find the letter without damaging anything.

She handed the letter to her father.

He read it silently, taking his time. She did not remember exactly what the letter said, but the words "less conspicuous" were still bouncing around in her memory. That should at least help.

Lord Caradoc carefully handed the letter to one of his constables. “We can compare this to other examples of Bannack’s handwriting?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” the constable confirmed.

“This is interesting and worth investigating.” Lord Caradoc turned back to Jasmine. “But it is not incriminating.”

“I know,” Jasmine hastily cut in. “I also have this.” She held out the bottle of ginever. “This is one of the premium stock, infused with magic. Infused with poison. If I remember correctly, customs does not take kindly to poisoned drinks.”

Ivran stepped forward. “Surely you hear how ridiculous this sounds . . .”

Lord Caradoc raised his hand to silence the man but kept his eyes fixed on Jasmine. “And?” he asked, as if aware she was not finished speaking.

“And I can prove it is poisonous,” she said, hoping this would work.

Ivran’s eyes went wide.

Jasmine swallowed. Her heart raced in her chest, once again drowning out all other sound in her ears. She turned to her father. “Do you have a medical kit with you?” Every constable cart carried a well-stocked medical kit.

Lord Caradoc raised his eyebrows, then turned to the constable on his right.

The man immediately stepped back to the black cart to retrieve it.

Jasmine risked a quick glance at Barrett.

He was breathing heavily, staring at the ground.

The constable returned with the kit. He opened the box and held it out in his hands, offering Jasmine her choice of instruments.

“Thank you,” she said, rifling through its contents. Her heart continued to race as she searched for a small cotton swab under the larger tools and ointments. Was it not here? She thought her ears might burst from the pressure, and her heart ached for whatever pain Barrett was feeling.

There.

She pulled out the small, unassuming swab and held it up. She felt relieved enough to giggle, and a bubbly exhale might have slipped out.

She looked down at the bottle of ginever. It was sealed with a cork, and the neck was fully encased with sealing wax. Popping the back end of the swab in her mouth, she peeled away at the wax. It was stiffer than it looked. She fumbled with it for a few moments, then looked up at her father. “Can you?” she asked, holding the bottle out toward him.

Lord Caradoc gestured to Ivran.

Jasmine turned, holding out the man’s own product with a smile.

Ivran glared at her, but a glance at Lord Caradoc—backed by several constables—must have convinced him he had no choice.

With a practiced ease, he ripped off the wax and twisted out the cork. He offered the bottle back to her, his eyes small slits.

Jasmine pulled the swab from her lips and accepted the bottle. She looked at Barrett, her hands shaking.

He was watching her, both present and unfocused. Jasmine felt her heart squeeze past the breaking point. He was slipping away from her, and she knew it.

She lifted the swab over the bottle, her hands shaking as she tilted it to get some liquid near its mouth. She dipped the swab into the ginever and counted five interminably long breaths.

She pulled the swab out, its cotton head completely black.

Disgusted, she leaned away from her own hands. She had never seen one this dark.

Barrett fell to the ground, another groan on his lips, this one weaker.

Forgetting all else, Jasmine set the swab and bottle at her feet and knelt beside him. She felt his forehead, his hands, his shoulders.

He blinked slowly, eyes unseeing.

"Help him!" Jasmine cried, yelling at Ivran.

"What am I supposed to do?" Ivran yelled back, holding his hands out and stepping away.

"Use magic," Jasmine yelled. "Undo the curse—anything! Do something!"

"I do not control magic," Ivran said. "I barely know how to use it. He brought this upon himself."

"No." Jasmine stood. "You cursed him. He was only a child. He had no say in this."

"Stop calling it a curse!" Ivran yelled back at her. "I siphoned magic into his body—it was an honor!"

"Father, please," Jasmine begged. "You have to believe me that Barrett is innocent in this matter."

Her father stood straighter, a hint of pride on his face. "Oh I believe you, Jasmine," he replied. "I was waiting to see how much Bannack would confess to." The hint turned into a full grin. "You were doing an excellent job with the interrogation."

Jasmine threw up her hands. "You could have said that sooner!"

"I have always said you would make an excellent constable!" Lord Caradoc replied.

"Not that. The other part," she said.

The constables approached Ivran cautiously. Ivran hesitated, his face paling. He looked to his own men for support, backing away from Lord Caradoc. A single step and he stood amongst the tall, strong wall of his bully-backs.

Jasmine was afraid a full-on fight would break out right in front of her eyes. And while the constables had the law on their side, Ivran had height and weight to win the immediate battle.

But one by one, Ivran's men stepped away from him, leaving him vulnerable. Ivran spun, looking to his disappearing guard, then lowered his shoulders. The constables stepped forward and made to arrest him.

Jasmine dropped back to her knees beside Barrett. Ivran was no longer her concern.

CHAPTER 16

Barrett lay unmoving on the ground. He appeared to be breathing, but his eyes were tightly shut.

“Barrett,” Jasmine called to him.

He opened his eyes at the sound of his name. He seemed to focus on Jasmine’s face, but there was no sign of recognition. His brows knit together in confusion.

There was no hint of a smile this time.

“Barrett!” Jasmine wanted to shake his shoulders, to wake him from whatever stupor he had fallen into.

“Come, daughter.” Lord Caradoc gently placed a hand on her shoulder. “My men will take him to the physicians. That is his best chance.”

“I will not leave his side!” Jasmine shook her head.

“And that is admirable, but you are about to go mad yourself from lack of sleep. Rest now. We will go to him first thing in the morning.”

Jasmine stood. Barrett was not dead. He was not even dying. She would remind him of all that they had shared. She would find him again and become his friend.

Two constables stepped forward and tried to lift him onto a stretcher. It took a third constable’s help to move him.

Her father put an arm around her shoulders, leaning on her. “Help me home, Jasmine,” he said. “My bones are too old for this kind of a night.”

Jasmine put her own arm around his waist, leaning into him and supporting him at the same time. She knew he was distracting her, and she was thankful for it.

“Wait.” She looked up at him. “Why are you here?”

“Your mother sent me,” he said. “She watched you and Ivran leave the hall and grew concerned after the doubts you shared with her.”

“Oh.” Jasmine smiled. “Thank you, Mama.”



Day—Jasmine woke to the bright sun lighting her room. She jumped from her bed, alarmed that she had slept in. She had only intended to sleep for an hour or two.

Running to the window, she peeked outside the curtain.

The sun was still low in the sky. It was not even midmorning yet, but bright snow on the ground reflected the light, making the day appear brighter.

Jasmine dressed hurriedly and went in search of news of Barrett.

Her father greeted her at the front door. He was buttoning his jacket, preparing to go out. "The older Hilliard boy is quite himself after some sleep, they say." He jumped immediately into the update, not bothering her with pleasantries. "He was released to Poppy and Edward this morning."

Jasmine grabbed her cloak from the closet by the door.

"I must head to the constabulary to tie up some loose ends from last night," her father continued.

Jasmine grabbed the door handle.

"Your mother and I will meet you there after she wakes."

Jasmine nodded, barely registering his words as she flew out the door. *Barrett is "quite himself,"* she repeated in her head. What did that mean?

She did not want to start to hope, but that did sound promising.

At the very least, he must be doing physically well.

And if he had lost memories, as Ivran had threatened, Jasmine would be there to remind him, as she had promised.

They had not really known each other for that long. It was not too late to start over as friends. And maybe that would grow into something more . . .

Standing just outside the front gate was a tall man in a fur coat. His hat was in hand as snowflakes fell on his dark hair and beard.

Jasmine stopped breathing, tears stinging her eyes as snowflakes tangled in her eyelashes. She smiled at him warmly. Tentatively.

He met her gaze directly, his eyes bright and shining and radiating familiarity. "Miss Caradoc." He bowed.

Her heart hammered in her chest, having completely switched speeds. Now it felt like it would never stop speeding up. "Barrett." She mouthed the word. She could not bring herself to address him as formally as he had addressed her.

"Allow me to escort you to my brother's house?" He held out his arm.

Jasmine took it, still staring up at him, afraid to break eye contact and yet afraid to say something she should not.

Barrett slipped his hand under her own, lifting it off his arm and tugging her close in front of him. "Jasmine," he breathed. His dimple showed. "I believe you have some scathing words to tell me concerning our first kiss?"

"Barrett!" Jasmine cried, throwing her arms around his shoulders.

He held her, lifting her feet off the ground as she laughed and cried into his neck.

"I remember everything," Barrett said, setting her down to look into her eyes. "At least I think I do. The memory I was most afraid to lose was a certain Christmas Eve from seven years ago. But after plenty of rest last night, none of Ivran's threats have come to pass." He tugged her closer to his chest.

"And your head pains?" She reached up, cupping his cheek. Mostly, all she could feel was his beard, but her thumb nestled perfectly against the soft skin just below his eye. She circled it gently.

"Gone." He smiled down at her. "None since last night. If they come back, we will find a way to manage them, but something tells me that part of my life is over."

Jasmine leaned against him, emotion filling her chest. She looked up at him, willing him to come closer. He leaned down and bumped his cold nose against her lips.

"How?" she asked. "What reversed the magic?"

“I have no idea.” Barrett dropped a shy kiss onto her lips. “Maybe the starlight reflected in your eyes has a different kind of magic.”



A and her bear walked away from Caradoc house, hand in hand, reunited at last. Behind them, small fragrant flowers bloomed on the hedge around the door, despite the winter chill. For starlight did contain magic, and when left to its own devices, it did nothing more harmful than make the flowers grow.

Although, perhaps, if one were to view a particularly bright star—or comet—through the small glass lens of a telescope, they might find themselves also able to bloom despite the chill of winter.



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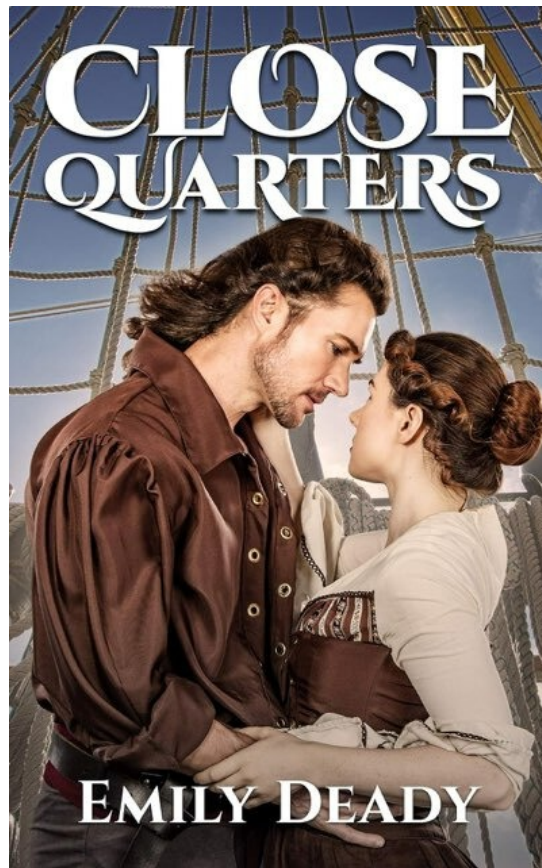
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to you for reading this short Christmas adventure! I hope it brought a few smiles to light up the darker nights this time of year.

Massive thanks to my husband, Ethan, who essentially co-wrote this one with me. This story would not have happened without his help. I look forward to weaving more adventures with you in real life and on the page.

Also thanks to the lovely group who invited me to participate in this Christmas Chronicle adventure! Be sure to check out their work if you have not already:

[Annette K. Larsen](#)

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